THE 'GIFT' OF THE DISASTER: SINGAPOREANS' GENEROUS RESPONSES TO THE INDIAN OCEAN TSUNAMI

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SUMMARY

The horrific Indian Ocean tsunami of 26th December 2004 was followed by a tidal wave of (dramatic and disturbing) media coverage focusing on the spectacular scale of destruction. Going beyond these immediate reactions to unpick the myriad geographies of the event, context and aftermath, my research agenda in the wake of the tsunami hovers on a(n) (impoverished) socio-political analysis, focusing on the multiple geographies of generous practices by Singaporeans to tsunami affected peoples and places. Building on debates related to topics of caring at a distance and the geographies of responsibility, I argue that while such literature flesh out moralizing exhortations for generosity to be extended to distant unknown strangers, they fail to exemplify practical reasoning to account for such generous practices. I seek to show that such failure stems from faulty assumptions about the sorts of influences people are liable to act upon (one that privileges casual knowledge as the primary motivating force) and also flawed assumptions about the sorts of problems that academic reasoning about normative issues are meant to address (the assumption that people are fundamentally egoistic and are not altruistic enough). Using the theme of generosity as an entry point, the thesis posits that the motivations driving Singaporeans' acts of donation and volunteerism should be understood as responsive and attentive relations of encounters with the needs of tsunami affected peoples and places. In such a formulation, generosity can be theorized as a modality of power. This allows for a critical examination of the ways in which Singaporeans' dispositions to respond to and be receptive to tsunami affected places and

peoples are worked up; and how such opportunities for acting responsively on these dispositions are being organized.

The production of this thesis signifies a humble but yet crucial intervention to exemplify how responses (as donors, as volunteers, as academic researchers) carry with them responsibility. There is a need for relief efforts to be carried out more sensitively, more fairly, more effectively. This is of great importance, not only for those still living through this tragedy, but also for all those who will be on the receiving end of disasters and relief efforts, yet to come. The opportunity and courage to reflect on these lessons, amidst all the pain and loss, is what the tsunami paradoxically offers us as a gift.

Keywords: Generosity, Donations, Volunteerism, Singaporeans, Indian Ocean Tsunami

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: DO SINGAPOREANS CARE?

1.1 Preamble: Do Singaporeans Care?

The radiance of pride could hardly be concealed from the faces of the medical personnel and social workers who had rendered their services to the peoples and places affected by the Indian Ocean Tsunami (IOT), as Prime Minister (PM) Lee Hsien Loong commended them in emphatic fashion during his National Day Rally Speech (2005: 1):

> Our response to the tsunami won us respect as well as friendship…It showed care for others and [that we] would do our best to help when our friends are in need…It's a great tribute to the men and women who took part. Your team work and spirit made it possible and you made us all proud to be Singaporeans. Some of you are here tonight. May I ask you to rise and stand and be recognized. We salute you.

As they rose much to the admiring gaze of the crowd, thunderous applause resonated around the auditorium. The revelation and valourization of Singaporeans' compassion was indeed a gratifying moment to remember.

Singaporeans have been quick to respond to the IOT of 26 December 2004 that had resulted in massive destruction to many Asian countries. Besides extending help through volunteering as revealed by PM Lee, Singaporeans' generous acts of donation have also been widely publicized (see *The Straits Times* (ST), 19 February 2005; *Channelnewsasia* (CNA), 12 August 2005). Indeed, with more than 1000 Singaporeans deployed and donations amounting to a remarkable S$150 million, it is no wonder that PM Lee (quoted in ST, 22 August 2005) describes it as the "nation's biggest ever relief effort" which is "unprecedented". Without over-romanticizing Singapore's role in tsunami aid, the exuberance of such celebratory accounts has been somewhat marred by a spate of heated debates in popular media that question the 'appropriateness' of Singaporeans' generosity. The genealogy of such interrogations can be traced back to a

poll conducted in 2006 by *The New Paper* (3 June 2006). Out of the 100 Singaporeans surveyed, more than half indicated indifference towards the IOT and their refusal to engage in any sort of generous practice. The overwhelming sentiment of this group is perhaps best encapsulated by the response of a 21 year old Singaporean, Mr Nicolas Pao, "Indonesia is so far away and I have my own problems to think about. Besides if we want to do something, we should do it for fellow Singaporeans and our local charities." Statements such as this are not about the apathetic nature of Singaporeans; rather it reflects more their parochial perspective. Nicolas' response is interesting because it mirrors academic discussions about care and its spatial reach. It supports a basic idea that the sorts of virtues that people display towards loved ones, friends, neighbours or compatriots become that much more difficult to sustain over long distances (see Conradson, 2003; Popke, 2006). As noted by Barnett (2005a), there is a tendency in these discussions to conflate 'distance' and 'difference' so that the problem of caring for distant strangers is rendered equivalent to the problem of relating to 'Others'. In other words, distance leads to (in)difference.

Consider the following provocative quote from Educational theorist Nel Noddings (1984: 32) which underscores the impossibility of *genuine* care for unknown strangers:

> I can 'care about' the starving children of Cambodia, send five dollars to hunger relief and feel somewhat satisfied. I do not even know if my money went for food or guns or a new Cadillac for some politician. This is second cousin to caring. 'Caring about' always involves a certain benign neglect. One is attentive just so far. One assents with just so much enthusiasm. One acknowledges. One affirms. One contributes five dollars and goes on to other things.

There is a clear spatial inflection to the distinction between caring-for and caring-about'—caring-for is direct, up close and implies relationships of close proximity. Caring-about, on the other hand, is indirect, is mediated and undertaken over distance. The strong implication of Nodding's distinction is that caring-for is a "more authentic disposition based on direct and unmediated response to the cared-for and a detailed attentiveness to how caring is received by the cared-for. Caring about, in contrast can actually lead to self righteousness, she suggests, because it can be undertaken out of a self interested motivation to be seen as a good person" (Noddings, 1984, cited in Barnett, 2005b: 590). This intrusion of self interest into the scene of care is enough to disqualify this style of concern from being a form of authentic care. Indeed, it is with such underlying epistemologies and conceptions that inspired early geographical works on care. These studies emphasize that caring competencies are learned *in situ* and that *place* necessarily serves as the basis for any extension of concern over larger scales (Sack, 1997). However, I would like to suggest that this line of enquiry is not performative of a discipline naturally incapable of opening up spaces of care for unknown 'Others'. Rather geography's disciplinary identity is a *doing* (c.f. Butler, 1990), a set of practices that is continuously reproducing the idea of the *situatedness* of care. Yet as historical geographer Mike Heffernan (2003: 19) reminds us, there is "no singular unified core to 'geography' and the 'geographical tradition' is one that follows the trend of an absence of conceptual conformity." The contours of geography continue to be (re)defined by critical geographers who purport for the extension of the spatial boundaries of care to include distant strangers. Hence this thesis is an opportunity to contribute to the ongoing project

of reformulating 'care' and the critical questioning of such issues in light of Singaporeans' generous behaviour in the aftermath of the IOT.

1.2 Aims and Objectives

At the broad level, the thesis addresses the huge epistemological debates looming over the ethical possibilities of caring for distant unknown strangers which form the fundamental crux that encapsulates my whole research. Building on discussions of both 'caring at a distance' (Silk, 1998; 2000; 2004; Smith, 2000) and 'geographies of responsibility' (Popke, 2003; Massey, 2004) which have come to be central themes around which geographers have framed their arguments for extending the spatial scope of beneficence, I contend that such claims are dependent on particular assumptions about the way in which normative issues articulate with theoretical and empirical projects. In particular, there is a tendency for the consideration of such moral questions to slide towards a moralization of academic judgment. In order to flesh out the claim about the moralizing tendency of geography's treatment of the above issue, I want to consider the key dimensions of discussions of both caring at a distance and the geographies of responsibility. As outlined earlier, the common assumption of discussions about 'caring at a distance' is the idea that care is inherently place-based and is highly difficult to sustain over large distances. There is, furthermore, a strong correlation of 'distance' with difference so that the difficulties associated with caring at a distance are parallel to the problems of relating to 'Others'. Distance and difference are considered problems because it is 'care' that is the privileged virtue in these discussions. The value of the caring relationship in contemporary moral philosophy is derived from an ongoing critique

of universalizing theories of justice. The justice/care binary is easily mapped onto the universal/particular pair and in turn onto the impartiality/partiality bifurcation. In turn it is easy for geographers to suppose that the universal and the particular map onto spatial relations of distance and extension on the one hand, place and proximity on the other.

It is from this set of homologies between on the one side, justice-universality-impartiality-distance and on the other side, care-particularity-partiality-proximity that geographers' distinctive problematizing of caring at a distance is derived. Sympathetic to the difference critique of universalizing theories of justice, attuned as they are to variety and diversity, geographers nonetheless loath to wholeheartedly embrace the value of care precisely because of its implied affirmation of the unavoidably partial nature of any and all ethical or moral judgment. The value of care is necessarily derived from it being a virtue of partiality, embedded in feeling and emotion, and it is easily set-off against dictates of reason. Hence, the idea that the value of care should be elevated over the abstract value of justice can as Smith (2000: 97) notes, easily turn into "an excuse for caring only for one's family or friends, or perhaps an exclusively defined set of members of the same ethnic or national group itself." Uneasy with such parochial notions, themes of caring at a distance and geographies of responsibility frame partiality as a problem to be overcome. However as I will show in the following chapter, such understandings are wrong-headed in that they are premised upon faulty assumptions about the sorts of influences that people are liable to act upon (one that privileges causal knowledge as primary motivating force) and also flawed assumptions about the sorts of problems that academic reasoning about normative issues are meant to address (the assumptions that people are naturally egoistic and not altruistic enough). Such assumptions are indicative

of wider conceptions of the self in which attention is centered almost exclusively on the person rendering care and his/her obligations, neglecting the needs of those being cared for. A long standing binary is thus set up between the active giver and passive receiver.

Addressing the problems inherent in 'caring at a distance' and the geographies of responsibility, geographers are recently espousing on the theme of generosity. As Barnett and Land (forthcoming) argue, generosity is interested in the relationships between giving and receiving, caring and being cared for. It opens up opportunities of thinking beyond dualisms of giving/receiving to think through the responsiveness and receptivity that motivate people to care. With respect to the IOT, Clark (forthcoming) argues that generosity acts as a good navigational compass to help us comprehend the reasons behind people providing aid to needy others. He argues that attuned attention should be given to the (human and non-human) agencies in raising awareness of the IOT and how they are complicit in the inducement of generous responses to peoples and places affected by the IOT. Premising on the idea that subjects are always already entangled in relational webs, Clark draws on the work of sociologists Anthony Elliott and Bryan Turner to delve into the somatic dimensions of human frailty. Humans are prone to being wounded because "our nervous systems connect us to the outside world with a plethora of pathways to bring us information about our immediate environment but these pathways are also the conduits of our pain and suffering" (Elliott and Turner, 2003: 134). The same pathways and conduits that expose our senses to the flood of painful sensation also lay us open to the sufferings of those affected by the tsunami, whose cries or grimaces may be no less amenable to blocking out or shutting down than any other sensory assault. It is in this way that we find ourselves, prior to any intent or deliberation, 'afflicted' by the plight of

another, an affliction that can upset the contours of our world, just as our pain does (Clark, forthcoming). Giving a geographical dimension to this conception, Clark draws on Harrison's (2007) work to further exemplify the receptivity of one to another (those affected by the tsunami), as the very event of inter-subjectivity, the scene in which selfhood is constituted. In other words, the experience of being for-another allows for the active process of subject formation and/or reconfiguration. This is a relation of proximity in which one is so close as to be moved or touched by the other, close enough to be drawn into the physical intimacy by the feeling of obligation to do something for those affected by the tsunami, those who appear in need. But it is at the same time a relationship characterized by an unbridgeable fathom distance given that the self knows that it has not lived through, cannot know what is to live through the experience of the tsunami 'victims' to whom they have come to feel bound. Thus, it is about the formation of a bond, a relation that enfolds within itself the condition of strangeness, the non-relation of unshared and incommunicable experience even as it opens up the very possibility of being-together (Clark, forthcoming).

Given Clark's rich theorization about the generosity induced by the tsunami as an event, I seek to further augment his arguments by giving an empirical dimension in my study of Singaporeans' generous practices to tsunami affected peoples and places. Modelling my aims and objectives along Clark's critical lines of inquiry, I aim to:

(1) evaluate the pathways and conduits that expose Singaporeans to the knowledge of the tsunami. In particular the role of the local media in producing and shaping selective dominant imag(in)ings of the tsunami will have material implications for development of generous practices.

(2) shed light on Singaporean's practices of generosity and elucidate how they are enabled, framed by and promoted through different organizational infrastructures. By taking a structural approach to understand *where* appeals come from, the agency and mechanisms for eliciting generous responses can be more carefully explicated.

(3) examine how the discursive appeals for generous practices are consumed, interpreted and even resisted by Singaporeans. By investigating the micro-geographies of Singaporeans' multiple and complex motivations to engage in generous behaviour, there can be a more fruitful decipherment of the receptive, responsive and attentive relationships through which ethical action is provoked. In addition, there will be explorations into how such generous practices actively (re)produce and refigure Singaporeans' conceptions of the 'self'.

By giving attention to the complex geographies of Singaporeans' generosity to tsunami affected peoples and places, this study can be seen as a response to the 'moral turn' (Smith, 1997) in geography. Congruent with Cloke's (2002: 591; original emphasis) recent call to go beyond "an abstract and intellectually fascinated but often uncommitted sense *of* the other in human geography to embrace a sense *for* the other which is emotional, connected and committed", there is a strong hope that the thesis goes on not only to contribute to securing a bigger role for ethics and emotions within the discipline (see Sant, 1992; Bondi, 2005) but also to invoke political-ethical action by individuals for the betterment of 'others'.

1.3 Organization of Thesis

This chapter has provided a general overview of the research direction and objectives of this study. Chapter **2** provides a selection of literature on the IOT, care and ethics before outlining the contours of the 'geographies of generosity' which will provide the analytical framework around which this study is structured. The methodological issues pertaining to this study will then be addressed in Chapter **3**. Chapter **4** discusses the popular representations of the tsunami and how they are closely intertwined with institutional appeals for generosity from Singaporeans. This chapter serves as a route map for the rest of the thesis, exploring how such discursive appeals serve as important motivating vectors for different practices of generosity—from monetary donations (Chapter **5**) to the embodied geographies of volunteering in tsunami affected places (Chapter **6**). Finally, Chapter **7** will reflect on the theoretical and methodological contributions of this study to the discipline as a whole and more specifically, to the advancement of the subdiscipline of geographies of generosity. More importantly the practical relevance of this thesis will also be exemplified to enhance a better understanding of the politics behind ongoing relief efforts.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL PARAMETERS

2.1 Preamble

This chapter evaluates a selection of theoretical approaches that will facilitate a critical analytical mapping of the socio-political issues that undergird this research on Singaporeans' expressions of generosity for peoples affected by the horrific IOT. The changing terrains of the burgeoning literature and reports on the IOT will be outlined in section 2.2. Despite the indulgent focus on this destructive event, it is surprising (and somewhat disturbing) that geographers have been relatively quiet in offering their contributions to provide crucial political-ethical interventions. I seek to fill this lacuna by building on debates related to the topics of caring at a distance and the geographies of responsibility. While such literature flesh out *moralizing exhortations* for generosity to be extended to distant unknown strangers, they fail to exemplify *practical reasoning* to account for such generous practices. I argue that such failure stems from faulty assumptions about the sorts of influences people are liable to act upon (assumptions that privilege causal knowledge as the primary motivating force) and also flawed assumptions about the sorts of problems that academic reasoning about normative issues are meant to address (assumptions that people are egoistic in nature and not altruistic enough). The theme of generosity is my entry point to argue for an ethical-political project that decentres the motivation of practical action away from the sovereign self towards responsive and attentive relations of encounter with the needs of others. Such understandings of generosity as a modality of power will be useful for the geographical investigation of Singaporeans' donations and volunteerism to tsunami affected peoples and places at the critical interface of ethics, morality and politics.

2.2 A Wave of 'Research' on the IOT

"The world's *most powerful* earthquake in more than 40 years…triggering massive tsunamis…!" (CNN official website, emphasis added). "The tsunamis are not the biggest in recorded history, but the effects may be *the biggest ever*..!" (UN official website, emphasis added). The string of superlatives encapsulates and attests to the heightened prominence of the IOT. Indeed with mounting casualties in 13 affected areas, the vast geographical extent of destruction invites and captures widespread imagination and attention. In what follows, a diachronic tracing of the ever-expanding repository of media reports and formal research will be undertaken, giving special attention to how the limited geographic works have engaged critically with these changing foci.

2.2.1 Media Coverage of the IOT

In her recent book, journalist Susan Moeller (1999) presents a compelling critique of media's peripatetic journalism and its preoccupation with crisis coverage. 'Compassion fatigue' as she terms it, is simply the fetishization of sensationalized imagery and language by the media in its reporting of crisis. Indeed as espoused by Moeller, the media's coverage of the IOT has been rapid, monumental and more importantly, constantly changing in focus (Wong, 2005). At the immediate onset of the disaster, most of the reports have concentrated generally on two themes which are descriptive rather than explanatory in nature (see Yong, 2005; Glassman, 2005). First, there is an inherent bias of the media in providing details on the occurrence of this shocking event—how it happened, the death toll in various affected areas, coupled with dreadful images and first-hand accounts by survivors that illustrate the vast extent of

destruction. For instance, an article by BBC reporter, Helen Lambourne entitled "Tsunami: Anatomy of a disaster" (BBC website report, 30 December, 2004), incorporates all the above listed elements. She starts off by describing in great specificity the tectonic origins of the tsunami before going into a country-by-country account of the death toll and estimated economic losses. Interestingly, she also included the narratives of some survivors in Thailand who claimed that the elephants knew that the tsunami was coming, causing them to stamp their feet. This claim cannot be substantiated but was possibly included to sustain audience interest. Similarly on the websites of both BBC and CNN set up shortly after the onslaught of the tsunami, vast amounts of information regarding death tolls, 'miracle' stories by survivors and even animated guides to explain the origin of the tsunami have been posted.

The second theme revolves around the issue of disaster relief efforts by various concerned countries. There has been a disproportionate amount of reports that focus on the outpouring of (predominantly 'western') aid to the victims of the tsunami (Glassman, 2005). For instance, a *New York Times* article (1 January 2005), published just five days after the occurrence of the event, announced that President Bush pledged to increase aid from US$35 million to US$350 million, the largest international assistance ever in any international crisis. Similar reports have been featured by CNN that focus on America's efforts in rendering aid to the tsunami-stricken areas (CNN website reports, 31 December, 2004; 3 January 2005). This skewed focus towards western aid can arguably be due to the superior reach of many 'western-centered' media which tend to report on their respective countries' contributions to the tsunami. A good example is BBC News (based in UK) which is the "world's largest and most trusted news organisation with over

250 news correspondents around the world and 58 international BBC news bureaux" (BBC website). A common critique of such emphasis on 'western' aid to the disaster-hit developing countries is that it reinforces negative stereotypes about 'Third World' nations as dependent, poor and inferior (Smith, 2000). On the other hand there should be recognition of Asian media's efforts in raising the visibility of regional aid. Xinhua News Agency (China) and Channelnewsasia (Singapore) have produced a plethora of accounts that attest to their individual countries' expression of concern for their disaster-hit neighbours (see for eg, *Xinhua News Agency*, 1 January 2005; *Channelnewsasia*, 5 January 2005; 6 January).

However, following a time lag, media reports on the tsunami tend to differ in their content. There is a greater focus on explanatory accounts and critical reflections on the possible lessons learned from this disastrous event. There are generally three areas which are well documented. First, there are a large number of media reports that attempt to explain the horrible death toll and what might be done to prevent such a calamity in future. The majority of them question and reflect upon the lack of tsunami warning systems (TWS) which if put in place, could have reduced the causalities drastically. An article in *The Seattle Post* (7 February 2005), argues that the long term success of TWS hinges more on politics and the competition for scarce dollars than technical wizardry. Similarly, an article published by BBC just over two months after the tsunami (9 March 2005), highlights the recognition of the importance of installing TWS in the Indian Ocean by world leaders and the role of the United Nations (UN) in coordinating these TWS in a timely and effective manner. Second, articles dealing with the detailed impacts caused by the tsunami are also relatively common. For instance, a recent report released by well-

known financial magazine *The Economist* (4 February, 2005) not only gives an in-depth analysis of the differential economic impacts on the affected countries but also elucidates the uphill challenges for the various governments to get their economies back on track. However, such impact studies are not restricted to the economic aspects only; rather there are various articles that explore other consequences brought about by the tidal wave, especially environmental ones (BBC report, 3 June 2005; 21 June 2005).

Despite a shift from sensationalism to more reflective works, there have been concerns raised about the sustained disembodied and disengaged reporting on the tsunami by the media. From my review of the reports above, it can be seen that the majority of them are from news agencies outside the countries affected by the tsunami. This may be due to the hegemony of reports that are documented in English (which indirectly explains the pervasiveness of certain regional and global English news agencies like BBC, CNN, Channelnewsasia) and my positionality as a researcher who only engages in English written reports due to my limited language capabilities. Many other reports that originate from Thailand and Aceh which are written in their local languages are usually neglected or are less prominent. Hence Schechter (2005) argues that the domination of such 'helicopter journalism' and distanced 'outside-in' reporting do not help explain much about what is actually going on within the tsunami-hit countries. There is a serious lack in (widely circulated) media reports of a nuanced *grounded* social analysis on the after-math of the tsunami—the rehabilitation and recovery process—which requires the input from victims and volunteers physically working in tsunami-hit areas. This gap within media reports raised by Schechter in turn proffers several intriguing questions: If it is so imperative to understand both the event and its aftermath, where can we locate alternative

sources of information so as to gain insights to the aforementioned missing dimension? Can such issues be addressed in detailed academic writings where researchers usually carry out extensive 'fieldwork' in tsunami affected areas?

2.2.2 Academic Writings on the IOT

Academic contributions to the tsunami have not been confined to the event *per se* but also to its aftermath. As time is needed to conduct research on the aftermath of the tsunami, it is perhaps interesting to observe the temporal dimension to these works as well. Academic writings on the Indian Ocean tsunami have been dominated by disciplines such as science and medicine. There are two main strands of works that are of importance here. First, a large proportion of writings by environmental scientists (e.g., geophysicists, geologists and marine biologists) are quick to implicate the lack of warning systems for the widespread destruction (Gupta, 2005; Huxley, 2005; Johnson, 2005; Kerr, 2005; Kintisch, 2005; Marris, 2005). Whilst such concerns are only addressed after a certain time period via the media, they are however taken up quickly in academic discourses. However in terms of content, academic literature tend to be more precise about the types of warning systems that can be deployed and provide more detailed analyses about the benefits of installing such systems. A good representation of such literature can be found in the article by Joseph and Prabhudesai (2005). Focusing on India, they argue that there is a need of a disaster alert system (DAS) that is capable of online transmission of real time integrated sea level and surface meteorological data so as to provide timely warnings about the occurrence of an impending tsunami. They suggest that the ubiquitous cellular phone network would be an important option that can be

effectively utilized to provide the crucial communication capability to DAS. However, following a time lag, many environmental scientists are coming out with papers dealing with the aftermath of the tsunami, especially the impacts of the event on the biophysical landscape (Chandrasekharan *et al*, 2005; Kabdasli *et al*, 2005, Vaidyanadhan, 2005). For example, Kabdasli *et al* (2005) are interested in the tsunami effects on the seabed profile as these, according to them, are important for coastal structures like sea outfalls or breakwaters. Using a 2-D numerical model to calculate cross shore sediment transport and to evaluate profile changes in the coastal seabed, they conclude that tsunami waves with their destructive nature can lead to dramatic vertical changes of the seabed. On the other hand, Dahdiuh-Guebas *et al* (2005) conduct research on the effects of the tsunami on mangroves. From their observation, even though the damage of mangroves was great in some areas, they also discovered that mangroves can act as defence for the human settlements around them from the destructive effects of the tsunami.

Embedded within the medical field, the second area of research broadly elucidates the experiences of medical personnel in attending to the 'victims' of the tsunami. As time is needed to engage in such practices, we are only starting to witness the rapid emergence of research agendas moving in this direction. There have been many works devoted to evaluating the various methods in disaster victim identification (Bajaj, 2005; Ladika, 2005). For instance, Lau *et al* (2005) describe Singapore's contribution to the international disaster victim identification (DVI) response mounted in Thailand. They argue that the systematic application of forensic pathology, forensic dentistry, DNA profiling and fingerprinting to human identification especially of bodies of various nationalities that were in advanced states of putrefaction, were crucial to the entire DVI.

Forward planning, adequate funding and international cooperation, as they posit are essential to mounting an effective response to any major mass disaster of the future. Other works are directed to documenting the medical needs and conditions of victims and highlight how workers on the ground have handled these cases so as to enable better-prepared medical responses to future disasters (Gregor *et al*, 2005; Gunasekaran *et al*, 2005; Krishnamoorthy *et al*, 2005; Maegele, 2005). Lim's *et al* collaborative research with two Korean medical relief teams in southern Sri Lanka provides good insights into many medical needs arising from the tsunami. They conclude that likelihood of waterborne diarrhoea was low due to adequate quantities of potable water; acute respiratory and chronic problems were prevalent in refugee camps and inadequate treatment of minor skin trauma/infections was evident. All these medical records were classified by age, gender and diagnosis so that they can be reviewed for future reference.

It is perhaps rendering injustice to many academics from other disciplines who have also been engaging in research on the tsunami by just mentioning works done in the two dominant fields stated above. Even though there are substantially less publications from these other disciplines, it will be useful to provide a general idea on the issues that they broach in order to gain a fuller picture of the event. For instance in the engineering arena, civil engineers have evaluated the extent of destruction on houses and designs that can be adopted in future so that buildings can better resist tsunamis (Hansen, 2005; Lubell, 2005; Robson, 2005). In the field of social sciences, there are many works covering pertinent societal issues that are created by the tsunami. Political scientists have generally been intrigued about the possibility of improved inter-state relations and diplomacy due to foreign aid rendered to the tsunami hit nations (Kelman, 2005; Thakur,

2005). Psychologists have been working closely with social workers to document the psychosocial aspects of the tsunami. Many have observed the trauma and mental stress disorders that plagued the victims of the tsunami, especially children who lost their families and became orphans in the process (Ashraf, 2005; Carballo *et al*, 2005; Miller, 2005; Ranjan and Saraswat, 2005). Similarly, sociologists and anthropologists working on the ground have also been interested in the conditions of survivors of the tsunami, and how they are coping with the aftermath of the event. For instance, Mudur (2005) argues that elderly people who are affected by the tsunami have special needs (e.g., more medical attention) but they are usually a marginalized group who has been ignored by aid agencies. MacDonald (2005) on the other hand, takes on an explicit feminist perspective, to investigate the importance of women in the wake of the tsunami. She purports that women are the most important agents in rallying the family together after a disastrous event and that more attention should be given to their contributions in the recovery process within a household.

Interestingly, the geography discipline shares the predicament of an under-represented corpus of writings with the other social sciences. To many fervent defenders of the discipline, this situation is shocking and reproachable since natural events like the tsunami have a "strong spatial dimension that requires collaborative work by the core specialties in geography" (Marston, 2005: 4). This point was also noted by Wong (2005), who concluded with great dismay, after conducting a simple internet search, that geography lags behind other disciplines and professionals in active 'research' on the tsunami. Typing the words "Indian Ocean Tsunami" into the search engine *Google* and then adding additional words that pertain to the different disciplines/areas of research, he

discovers that the number of hits for the intersections between the tsunami and 'geographers'/'geography' is far less than other fields like medicine. Hence Wong (2005: 257) emphatically exclaims the rhetorical question, "Where are the Geographers", in a bid to elicit responses from within the discipline. Sidaway and Teo (2005: 2), on the other hand, challenge geographers "to unpick the myriad geographies of the event, context and aftermath." In lieu of such pleas, there has been an increasing visibility of geographical works (both physical and human) researching on the tsunami. According to Buranakul *et al* (2005), geographers have made important inroads in three research niches and what is common about them is perhaps an intense desire to get away or go beyond the notion of the tsunami as 'just' a natural disaster. Firstly, a plethora of works has mainly concentrated on physical and socio-economic impacts of the tsunami in various localities (Bishop *et al*, 2005; Brown, 2005; Rigg *et al*, 2005; Keys *et al*, 2006). Physical geographer Paul Bishop and his team (2005) for instance, have attempted to employ the method of optically stimulated luminescence to date ancient tsunami deposits in order to map out the occurrence of tsunami in Thailand over time. This empirical study they argue will aid in accessing ecological damage to the area and the pace of recovery of the natural environment in the aftermath of each tsunami. Rigg *et al* (2005) on the other hand are similarly interested in the 'field' site of Thailand, albeit focusing on the social-economic impacts of the tsunami. What is perhaps commendable about their efforts is an insistence to document the often 'hidden' geographies and missing storylines of poor fisherfolk and migrant workers in the tourism industry who were arguably the hardest hit communities of the disaster. Feminist perspectives are also infused in such impact studies. They look at the gendered dimensions of the tsunami—women are often disproportionately affected by

the disaster and for a variety of reasons (their responsibilities for children and elderly relatives, their role in fishing communities and how this placed them in vulnerable sites when the tsunami struck and so on). Interesting questions that can be raised with regard to post-tsunami life include: Will men take on new domestic roles? Will marriages between younger women and older men become more common? Research of this nature can provide "windows of insight to the relevance, production and performance of social structures across cultures" (Buranakul *et al*, 2005: 247).

The second strand of geographical works revolves around issues of tsunami prediction and mitigation so as to alleviate the impacts created by such disaster in future. For instance, Williams (2005), active in the field of coastal management suggests that mangroves and other coastal ecosystems have a role in reducing the impact of tsunamis and protecting human settlement, thus potentially reducing human tolls. In a similar vein, the *Journal of the Geological Society* (India) included a special theme issue (April 2005, 65(4)) evaluating on the future threats of tsunami in South Asia. There were postulations over the various ways to predict the occurrence of earthquakes and tsunami and also suggestions of coastal management strategies to mitigate the effects of tsunamis. In addition, the critical potential of tools such as Geographic Information System (GIS) and remote sensing (which are now fairly standard apparatus in many geography departments) is espoused to emphasize their practical usage in the event of a tsunami (Bally *et al*, 2005; Borrero, 2005; Wong, 2005). Bally's *et al* work, for example, clearly exemplifies the usefulness of remote sensing as a life saving equipment that can be employed in the wake of a disaster. Using the case of the IOT, he argues that remote sensing can help identify the affected areas and humanitarian aid can then be deployed

efficiently to provide timely help to the victims. Borrero (2005) on the other hand, uses satellite imagery to elucidate the effects of tsunami on Banda Aceh, hoping to achieve the same aim as Bally *et al*, to dispatch help to areas which require them most.

Lastly, a number of human geographers are dedicated to exploring the multifaceted manifestations of politics in various aspects of the tsunami. One area of such works pays attuned focus to the intertwining of geopolitics into representations of the tsunami, as exemplified in several thoughtful commentaries (Glassman, 2005; Olds *et al*, 2005). These publications centre on the contention that since a considerable number of westerners perished in the IOT, it has garnered more prominence in the media than the deaths of millions of Congolese or Iraqi civilians. They purport that white life and white death would seem to count for more in the calculus of interest, concern and grief represented in the western media. Bunnell and Nah (2005), in their intervention piece published in the *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* (SJTG), however diverge in their research orientation by dwelling on the cultural politics of Malaysia's ambiguous policy of sending aid to tsunami victims in Aceh while simultaneously deporting Acehnese refugees. They argue that the Malaysian government shares with Acehnese refugees on its shores the hope that out of military and natural devastation emerges a post-tsunami Aceh to which they would voluntarily wish to return.

Another area which is of growing interest to many geographers involves the understanding of the geometries of power entangled in the dynamics of response, rehabilitation and recovery. Buranakul *et al* (2005*)* for instance are interested in critical questions that hover around distribution of international aid: how was relief targeted? Where did the relief come from? What kinds of knowledge/power regimes help to shape

these spatial dynamics of foreign international aid coming into the tsunami-hit countries? Likewise, though drawing on different theoretical traditions, Korf (2006a; 2006b), Clark (2005) and Clark *et a*l (2006) have expounded on the theme of generosity to illustrate that seemingly best intended post-disaster gifts to help people in need may produce less intended outcomes. For example, Korf (2006b) gives a convincing account of how the practices of gift giving after the tsunami become a humiliating force for those who are at the recipient end of the gift chain because the promotion of western generosity by the media and aid agencies portray those affected by the tsunami as "pure victims", as "bare life"—passive recipients who are disregarded as fellow citizens on this planet. Furthermore, more often than not, gifts are not devoid of politics in that generosity is conditional—individuals desire the feeling of doing something good and private donors want to see their donations flourish. However Korf is not attempting to engage us in a moral debate of whether generous practices should carry on unabated despite such circumstances. Rather he elucidates the importance of being more careful and reflexive about the way we give and giving more attention to the organizational channels through which gifts are mediated. In addition, there is a need to invite responses from those who are on the receiving end, so as to ground our duty to help" distant sufferers in *their* moral entitlement to be aided" (Korf, 2006: 366; original emphasis).

My research agenda mirrors that of Korf in that my interest lies in exploring Singaporeans' generous responses to tsunami affected peoples in distant places—localities that go beyond the national boundaries. I concur with Korf that gifts are unlikely to be conditional but I seek to delve more deeply into the conditions that accompany giving, particularly looking at the social structures and/or social systems that

influence and mediate gift decisions and practices. Whilst scholars like Korf and Clark have provided a persuasive *theoretical* account of the nuances of generosity and its implications for tsunami relief, there has been little *empirical* documentation of the actual dynamics and intricate relations between generous individuals, aid agencies and gift recipients. Hence this study aims to fill in this geographical lacuna, to extend an enquiry into how generous practices creates an ongoing connection, however superficially, between those who give aid and those who receive it, closing the distance between 'them' and 'us'. Echoing Clark *et a*l (2006), I seek to show how the event of the tsunami acts as a break in normal relations, as a basis for renegotiating relationships and connections but also forces us to consider how such moments may be sustained into the process of rebuilding and reconstructing the Indian Ocean region. In what follows, I will situate my research within contemporary geographical literature which border on the theoretical interface of ethics, care and responsibility.

2.3 Geographical Perspectives on Ethics, Care, Responsibility

In Geography, the concept of ethics has often been utilized to spearhead investigations into people's care and responsibility to distant unknown strangers. Specifically, geographical literature on "Caring at a distance" and "Geographies of Responsibility" offer suggestions on why we should extend our spatial scope of beneficence, to eschew reserving care/responsibility only for those nearest and dearest to us. In such a formulation, partial commitments are deemed morally and politically problematic since they prioritize self interest, exclusionary and geographically restricted ways of relating to others. This section will elucidate that such literature are premised

upon faulty assumptions, hence restricting their practical concern to engaging in moral exhortations for people's obligations to distant 'Others'. I suggest that an alternative concept is needed to provide *practical reasoning* and highlight the underlying *mechanisms* for extending the spatial boundaries of care/responsibility. The theme of generosity will be introduced subsequently as the conceptual framework to guide my research on Singaporeans' motivations in extending aid to tsunami affected peoples and places.

2.3.1 Ethics and Geography

In recent years, investigations of a moral or ethical nature appear to be flourishing within human geography. Indicative of a nascent 'moral turn' (Smith, 1997) in human geography, the burgeoning literature dealing with ethics and geography adamantly attests to this interest (see for eg Proctor, 1998; Low, 1999; Proctor and Smith, 1999; Smith, 2000). Largely through a productive engagement with moral philosophy and political theory, these works have highlighted the moral and ethical implications of geographical representation/discourse and practice in areas such as environment and landscape (Faulstich, 1998; *Ethics, Place and Environment*, 2001a; Smith, 2001; Howitt, 2002); human rights and social justice (Harvey, 1996; Low and Gleeson, 1999); globalization, geopolitics and development (Slater, 1997; Young, 1999; Wood, 2000), and the ethics of research process (Hay, 1998; *Ethics, Place and Environment*, 2001b). These works have made important contributions to the discipline by exposing the often unstated and taken-for-granted ethical implications of our theories and by continuing to place issues of justice, rights and ethics on the geographical agenda. Simultaneously, geographers have

also strived to enrich moral and ethical theory by calling attention to the spatial implications of our moral and ethical commitments. Perhaps the over-riding sentiment of these works has been a concern to interrogate the common tendency to privilege the local over 'distant strangers'. Is it possible to activate a form of responsibility to those with whom we have "no direct social interaction, to challenge the 'out-of-sight, out-of-mind' mentality that would appear to be a feature of our geographical experience" (Popke, 2003: 300)? Hence huge epistemological debates revolve around the issue of the spatial scope of beneficence, or to put it explicitly in David Smith's (1998) provocative words, "How far should we care?" In both geography and moral philosophy, this debate hinges on the tension between a partial ethics of care and an impartial ethics of justice.

Ethics of care raises "caring, nurturing and the maintenance of inter-personal relationships to the status of foundational moral importance" (Friedman, 1993: 147). This concept has been figured prominently in moral philosophy since introduced by Carol Gilligan (1982) as what was initially claimed to be a distinctively female perspective, subsequently developed into a broader critique of mainstream thinking by Tronto (1993), Hekman (1995) and Clement (1996), among others. Such 'alternative ethics', intricately associated with strands from feminism and communitarianism emphasizes partiality. By extending pre-modern concepts of morality as essentially contextual (historically and geographically), they argue for a restricted scope of concern for others. As MacIntyre (1981: 126-7) puts it succinctly, "all morality is always to some degree tied to the socially local and particular…the aspirations of the morality of modernity to a universality freed from all particularity is an illusion." This sentiment is clearly echoed in the writings of Etzioni (1995) whose notion of the 'spirit of community' reveals a hierarchy of moral

responsibility with implicit spatial ramifications. First, people should help themselves to the best of their abilities; the second line of responsibility lies with those closest, including "kin, friends, neighbours and other community members" (Etzioni, 1995: 144). However there is also recognition that "one of the gravest dangers in rebuilding communities is that they will tend to become insular and indifferent to the fate of outsiders; hence she argues that we start with a responsibility to ourselves and to members of our community, and it is necessary that we expand the reach of our moral claims from there" (Etzioni, 1995: 146-7). In somewhat similar fashion, Jagger (1995: 132), approaching from a feminist standpoint, refers to a kind of caring that "requires knowing people in their concrete particularity rather than as representatives from disadvantaged groups", a pertinent aspect of which is a focus on particular individuals rather than the abstractions of masculine thought like equality and reciprocity.

Conversely, ethics of justice finds deep roots in the customary Enlightenment position of impartiality grounded in rights and utilitarianism. This reflects the mainstream perspective where care is regarded as a universal value, closely intertwined with the idea of social justice. The underlying principle is that if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought morally to do it in the name of justice. Unlike ethics of care, this principle takes no consideration of proximity and distance, with most proponents of this account beginning with some notion of mutual recognition of human commonality. As such, it is argued that universal similarities are sufficient to transcend local particularities so that those who are in urgent need have a claim on us for special kindness (Besley, 1995: 48). For instance, Singer (1972; 1995), calling for alteration in

the way affluent countries react to situations such as famine in poorer parts of the world, concludes that we ought to give as much as possible to famine relief perhaps to the point of marginal utility at which by giving more we would cause ourselves more suffering than we would prevent. He suggests that to live ethically is to act on the conclusions of reflections, which if undertaken seriously, will lead to the point of view of the universe rather than myopic sectional interests: "From this perspective, we can see that our own sufferings and pleasures are very like the sufferings and pleasures of others, and that there is no reason to give less consideration to the sufferings of others, just because they are 'others' "(Singer, 1995: 222). Smith (2000: 42) on the other hand, asserts that "morality…has its roots in the facts of human dependency and connectedness, in the inescapably social nature of human existence." Such an argument would appear to have increased persuasion in the contemporary world where globalization has enhanced the interactions and interconnectedness between local and distant strangers (Corbridge, 1998).

Summarizing the above discussion, the tension between a partial ethics of care and an impartial ethics of justice is often mapped onto a spatial distinction between responsibilities to proximate others and responsibilities to distant others. Both arguments share an implicit consensus of proximity in terms of common identity and shared interests. And it is precisely such arguments that inform and frame recent works emerging from the sub-discipline broadly classified as geographies of care.

2.3.2 Geographies of Care

Questions of care appear to be catching the imagination of researchers across several areas of human geography (see Conradson, 2003; Parr, 2003 for review). It is interesting to note that research done in geographies of care mirror the debate between impartial ethics of justice and the partial ethics of care outlined in the preceding section. Studies which draw their conceptual inspiration from 'ethics of care' align themselves closely with post-structural epistemologies to emphasize the situatedness of care and the importance of familiar sites of care provision. Post-structural theory which focuses on the socio-spatial boundaries constructed between 'us' and 'them' ensure that care is explicitly provided for people with similar identities within a particular locality. This is succinctly pointed out by Milligan (2001) who asserts the need to look at the interconnectivities that characterize care as a relationship. She argues that since such interconnectivities are not uniform across time and space, there is a need to examine care and its complex webs of relations *in place*. Hence, in view of such theorizations of care, there is a growing corpus of works that explores the significance of (health) care in particular settings (Kearns and Gesler, 2000). Reflective of a broader shift from medical to health geographies envisaged by Kearns (1993), these research strive to go beyond the sub-discipline's conventional delineations of investigating the geographical complexities surrounding the provision, access to and (in)equality of health care (although this is still a strong and important theme; see Hotchkiss, 2001; Higgs and Gould, 2001; Gould and Moon; 2000; Ricketts *et al* 2001) to "construct accounts of why place matters to health and health care" (Mohan, 2000: 330). Milligan (2000; 2003), for instance, has written about the home-space in this regard, while Twigg's (2000) work on bathing and intimate

care is similarly attentive to domestic spatialities. The complex material and psycho-social dimensions of care in the home emerge prominently in these accounts—despite often benevolent intentions, the quality and consistency of such care is variable and its delivery is often emotionally demanding (see Allan and Crow, 1989; Woon, 2005). Other research have focused on mental health care (Philo, 1997; Kearns and Joseph, 2000; Parr, 2000; Pinfold, 2000), hospices (Brown and Colton, 2001; Brown, 2003a), hospitals (Allen, 2001; Brown, 2003b) and 'alternative' medical centres (Williams, 2000; Wiles and Rosenberg; 2001; Brown, 2003b). Within these studies, there is an emphasis on how relations and practices of care—tasks such as listening, feeding, and administering medication—are implicated in the production of particular social spaces. The care-taking tasks which bring people together in these settings involve both physical and emotional labour and often depend disproportionately upon the commitment of women (Finch and Groves, 1983; Ungerson, 1990; Daly and Lewis, 1998).

2.3.3 'Caring at a Distance' and 'Geographies of Responsibility'

While the dominance of poststructuralism within the discipline has led to many arguing for the situatedness of care, some geographers are increasingly questioning whether care can be framed as an ethics of encounter (Gordan, 1999), as a set of practices which shape human geographies beyond familiar sites of care provision. They argue that extending the scope of care in humanitarian fashion certainly requires more than the form of partiality that both feminist theorists of care and communitarian theorists value, which remain embedded in the personal sentiments that motivate care for one's nearest and dearest (see Smith, 2000: 97-106). However these geographers tend to fall back on a

variant of weak universalism (similarly proposed by the concept of ethics of justice) which posits some principle of identity, solidarity or similarity as the grounds for extending care to distant strangers. This is where arguments about 'caring at a distance' (Silk, 1998; 2000; 2004) connect up with the other strand of debate that I want to engage with at length—discussions of the geographies of responsibility (Popke, 2003; Massey, 2004; Lawson, 2007). Geographers have pointed out that the fundamental imperative to extend obligations over distance stems from the complexity of causal relationships that connect people living in different places through market transactions, supply chains, or displaced pollution effects. These connections attest to the interconnectedness of the world we inhabit, and signify that we are in fact bound up with and implicated in the lives of all sorts of people living in all sorts of different places (Corbridge, 1998). The seductiveness of this model of responsibility arguably lies in the idea that geography is well poised to exemplify its pedagogical value by demonstrating to those in positions of privilege that they do indeed have these sorts of responsibilities. Empirical observations of the interdependence of spatially disparate activities are presented as the key foundation for an expanded geographical ethics of responsibility appropriate for a globalized world. Geography's contribution as a discipline lies in the claim that knowledge of distant outcomes is a prerequisite for responsible action.

There are various examples that would fit into this paradigm. One good reference point is Harvey's (1990) detailed exploration of the concept of geographical imagination, which has induced a whole field of work on commodity chains in which it is purported that by demonstrating the linkages between locations of production, networks of distribution and acts of consumption, the alienating effects of modern capitalism can be

countered. The 'relational turn' in geography has also given rise to the epistemological salience of actor-network theory which is similarly enrolled into the same type of project (Whatmore and Thorne, 1997). The shared assumption is that the key to motivating moral or political action is to enable people to recognize their embeddedness in complex networks of commodification and accumulation (Castree, 2001). Hence knowledge is deemed as the pre-requisite for various strategies of re-connection.

2.3.3 Critiques of 'Caring at a Distance' and 'Geographies of Responsibility' Literature

While works relating to the sub-fields of 'Caring at a distance' and 'Geographies of Responsibility' appear fundamentally sound, it must be emphasized that the arguments presented will only stand given certain (problematic) assumptions—first, ordinary people are currently not engaged in all sorts of caring, responsible activities, and second, that this is because they inhabit a world of veiled relations that hides from view their real interests and obligations. As Barnett and Land (forthcoming) reveal, there is an unacknowledged moralism imbued in these discussions, in so far as the presumption is that people are naturally inclined to act in egoistic pursuit of their own self interest unless motivated to do so otherwise. Ricouer (2000) goes so far as to suggest that the problem arises from the vocabulary of responsibility itself. Evoking the idea of responsibility immediately conjures the issue of imputing blame and establishing liability. 'Responsibility' and 'obligation' connote burdens, the very stuff that people might be expected to shirk if they had an opportunity. Furthermore, such problematic assumptions also rein in another fundamental weakness of the arguments discussed above.

Recognizing that their (unwitting) actions will produce (unintended) consequences may not necessarily motivate people to do something to change the outcome. Establishing that actions have effects that may not have been intended, by virtue of the intermediary operations of other human and non-human actors that are required for these actions to come-off successfully, is certainly a good way of showing people that their own actions bring about potentially wide consequences. But precisely because the demonstrations of a person's implication in, say, labour exploitation or in environment pollution only works by establishing the dependence of these consequences of myriad mediating actions, then strictly speaking, the motivating force of the demonstration is fairly indeterminate. It might convince people that their actions contribute, in small ways, to the reproduction of those harms; it is just as likely for someone to arrive at the conclusion that since their actions are so highly mediated that not only are they not able to do much about it, but they can well dismiss it as not being responsible in any reasonable sense. This is the impasse that any theory that derives responsibility or obligation from a person's own actions ends up facing:

> A person can be morally responsible only for what he does; but what he does results from a great deal he does not do; therefore he is not morally responsible for what he is and is not responsible for
>
> (Nagel, 1979: 34)

Nagel tries to suggest that grounding questions of moral obligations on causal principles actually leaves everything important about the motivation of moral action out of the picture. Because the 'geographies of responsibility' story presumes that people are responsible by virtue of the extended effects of their own actions, it cannot in fact do

what it claims to do, namely establish a compelling reason to take responsibility for those distant consequences.

Hence by presuming that either empirical or conceptual demonstrations of implication in spatial relations of connection and entanglement can both justify and thereby motivate action, geographers fail to give adequate attention to what one might call, following Korsgaard (1996), the sources of normativity. To put it simply, this puts forth the question of how and why normative claims should be acted upon at all—how conduct in relation to norms, principles and values are actually motivated. Consider, for example, similar arguments of Iris Marion Young (2004) and Onara O'Neill (2000). Both seek to provide a geographically expansive account of moral and political obligations. In terms of their geographical content, both arguments seem to lend strength to geographers' assertions about the spilling over of responsibility into globalized networks of action. However a deeper reading into their work reveals how they mobilize geographical aspects of their argument in relation to somewhat different normative principles. For example, Young is doing more than simply relating a geographical tale about the responsibilities we have since we are connected into wider spatial systems. Her purpose is, rather, to establish some basic principles through which people can reason about their actions. This account, stressing questions of power and privilege as well as connections is certainly compelling. But what I am trying to illustrate here is that Young's guiding normative principle is the idea that people are likely to be moved by a concern to avoid their complicity in reproducing harm or their unwitting implication in the reproduction of harm. In O' Neill's work, one can find a parallel argument, one that comes to similar conclusions regarding the widened geographical scope of responsibility and obligation,

but which is premised on a different normative principle. O'Neill suggests that we should afford equal moral status to distant others because in our everyday activities, we presume and take for granted their status as moral agents. Therefore we owe justice and moral standing to distant strangers as well as to those close at hand:

> Hence if we owe justice (or other forms of moral concern) to all whose capacities to act, experience or suffer we take for granted in acting, we will owe it to strangers as well to familiars, and to distant strangers as well as to those who are near at hand.
>
> (O'Neill, 2000: 196)

The important point here is that O'Neill's guiding principle of moral motivation is not the avoidance of harm but is instead a revised constructivist account of Kantian universalizability, according to which actors are beholden by their practical actions to treat others as pure ends in themselves.

My purpose of contrasting O'Neill and Young is twofold. First, and to reiterate, simply establishing geographically extensive patterns of causal responsibility by identifying various mediating networks into which our actions are inevitably bound, actually has no motivating force in and of itself. That is why in the examples noted above appeals are also made to self interest or to a sense of fairness, in addition to connections. Second, the assumption that geographical knowledge can and must fulfill this motivating function has the effect of hiding from view the different normative principles that are in play for these sorts of demonstrations: principles such as avoidance of harm, expressions of solidarity and/or autonomy. Hence O'Neill and Young are challenging us to think more critically about the dominant conception that understandings of responsibility can be arrived at monologically, outside of any encounter with others. There is a "disposition

which in presuming that it is possible or preferable to take on the suffering of the world, inadvertently arrogates to itself the perspective of the arrogant observer" (Williams, 2006: 145). As Barnett and Land (forthcoming) rightly point out, atomism and detachedness are implied through the understanding that tracking consequences and worrying primarily about the outcomes of one's actions should form the criteria for normatively evaluating one's conduct. The fixation on the chains of causality often leads us to forget that responsible, caring action is often motivated not in monological reflection on one's own obligations but by encounters with, and responses to, the needs of others. There is a need to call for a more explicit reflection on the claims and expressions of others that motivate action. In the absence of this type of normative reflection, geographers' discussions of these issues are likely to continue to take the form of moralistic exhortations that people should be *more* responsible, *more* caring, *more* moral.

To summarize the discussion thus far, geography's engagements with moral philosophy are wrong-headed, given that they are premised on faulty assumptions about the sorts of influences that people might be open to and indeed the sorts of problems that moral reasoning are meant to address. There is a broadly shared assumption that the task of a morally engaged, normatively committed geographical practice is to overcome entrenched tendencies towards acting in self interested ways and according to a geographically restricted horizon of obligation. As suggested, there is an inbuilt tendency to align self interest with a restricted geographical imagination and to counter-pose this to altruism, which in turn is aligned with more expansive horizons. Hence if we follow Sack's arguments that "altruism inspires a care for distant strangers (others with whom one has no personal connection to and hence nothing personally to claim)" (Sack, 2003:

29) and his further exhortations that the task of geography is to assist in justifying being less self centered and more altruistic, then we would fall into the trap both of assuming that people are naturally self interested and that caring, being generous towards strangers is not an ordinary part of everyday life as well as assuming that altruism should be considered wholly at odds with self regarding concerns.

2.4 Conceptual Framework: Generosity, Motivation and Disposition

In order to shift attention away from the problematic assumptions that self interest is a natural disposition that needs to be countered and that moral actions such as altruism need to be motivated by providing cast-iron justifications, the theme of generosity will be introduced. It must be stated at the outset that generosity is not wholly at odds with ideas presented in the 'geographies of responsibility' and 'caring at a distance' literature. Indeed, the concept of generosity does not deny the importance of issues relating to ethics, care, justice and responsibility; rather it sets out to provide an alternative pathway into a nuanced understanding of how these virtues are being motivated. As stated earlier, one of the biggest inadequacies of research relating to the subfields of the 'geographies of responsibility' and 'caring at a distance' is that by demonstrating that people's actions here may have undesirable consequences elsewhere, such works can only morally exhort for *individual* obligations to do something for distant unknown strangers but provide no compelling reasons for them to do so. The concept of generosity as I will seek to show, decentres the motivation of practical action away from the sovereign self towards responsive and attentive relations of encounters with the needs of others. Hence, the

focus will no longer be on individual obligations but rather on the agencies and mechanisms that enable the opening of oneself to the needs of others.

A good starting point here will perhaps be to interrogate the relationship between altruism and self interest because it will pave the way for the discussion of generosity. It is perhaps not contentious to claim that most models of altruism remain highly monological. They tend to set up a dichotomy between the giver and receiver, ascribing the giver with all the active attributes of moral subjectivity at the cost of the receiver who is thereby rendered a rather passive subject. Moreover, by ignoring the instrumental concerns that motivate altruistic actions, such models assume that the value of an altruistic act can be wholly determined by reference to the intention behind it, irrespective of the outcomes of any act. Both these problems are indicative of the assumption that altruism and self interest possess a zero-sum relationship: being altruistic means having to forego any self regarding calculations. But one cannot account for generous or altruistic conduct without considering the co-implication of self interest and altruism, of intrinsic and instrumental concerns (see Mansbridge, 1990). The generous subject cannot discount the 'goods' valued by the recipient of any altruistic act:

> We cannot coherently imagine a world in which everyone had exclusively altruistic motivations. The goal of an altruist is to provide others with an occasion of selfish pleasures—the pleasure of reading a book or drinking a bottle of wine one has received as a gift. If nobody has first order, selfish pleasures, nobody could have higher-order altruistic motives either.
>
> (Elster, 1989: 53-4)

One could claim that Elster's statement is hardly groundbreaking and could almost be considered to be one of truism. However, when analyzed against the dominance of

monological readings of altruism, it only serves to remind us that altruism only makes sense if one supposes that other people (the objects of one's generosity or altruism) have quite a valid interest in their own pleasures, in augmenting their own capacities. If this instrumental, outcome oriented consideration is ignored, any altruistic act—the giving of care without concern for oneself—would turn out to be self negating. It would be little more than an act done to augment the moral righteousness of the generous subject. Such arguments put emphasis on the idea that self interest and altruism are not opposed versions of selfhood, and that there is also a need to consider more modest, less subject-centred conceptions of the self since altruism is very much relationally inspired, often dependent on recipient's needs.

One source for developing such conceptions is the recent literature expounding on the theme of generosity. Thinking about the relationships of generosity illuminates new ways of understanding self interest and other, regarding virtues of egoism, and altruism. The theme of generosity has been most richly explored in mainstream moral philosophy and social theory as well as in debates inflected by post-foundationalist Continental philosophy (Schrift, 1997). More often than not, these works touch on the conceptual parameters offered by gift theories and they suggest a reposing of questions of morality that might escape the strictures and prescriptions of accounts that focus overwhelmingly on providing justifications for various forms of obligations. Theories of the gift are often presented as an alternative to the economistic calculation of exchange and contract. This understanding has its origins in anthropology where the gift is conceptually constructed as a mode of interaction that symbolizes values of reciprocity that supposedly ground the very possibility of sociality and community. Since Mauss

(2002), the gift is used to initiate a chain of relations in which the presentation of the gift obligates the recipient to offer a gift in return, thereby "setting in motion temporal, lasting cycles of obligations" (Gudeman, 2001: 80). In anthropology, the value of gift relations is derived from the assumption that relationships of commodity exchange or contract are essentially egoistic and atomistic, whereas the gift is relational and altruistic. As such, anthropological accounts of the gift provide alternative discourses to seemingly hegemonic arguments of modern economic theories of rational choice. Gift theories can only function as divergent from egoistic, self interested models of social interaction through embedding sociality ever more firmly within a circle of obligatory relationships (Bartnett and Land, forthcoming). However Derrida's *Given Time* (1992) calls into question the assumption that gift relations offer a preferred, morally superior model of conduct, by illustrating that the degree to which the calculative give and take of gift relations is identical to that normally seen in exchange and contract. Derrida takes the critical stance that as soon as a gift is given, knowingly as a gift, the subject of generosity is always anticipating a return; already taking credit of some sort, if only credit for being generous. This relationship between giving and taking inscribes the gift within a circuit of reciprocal exchange that it is supposed to exclude. The apparently 'ethical' content of the generous act is thereby annulled in the very moment of its taking place (Barnett, 2005a).

It is certainly not the wish of Derrida to suggest that all social relations are self interested ones. Rather it is to call into question the assumption that moral relationships must necessarily be premised on an ethics of symmetrical reciprocity—an assumption that underlies monological forms of reasoning in which subjects are held to be obliged with reference to their own voluntary actions. Derrida points to the impossibility of a

pure gift relation and hence it might be a good idea to stop supposing that it should serve as a benchmark of critical judgment or normative evaluation. More fundamentally, his deconstruction of the classical anthropological discourse of a foundational reciprocal generosity is shaped by a concern to uncover the degree to which the type of moral reasoning exemplified by gift theory is dependent on notions of property—of the possession by a subject of its own self and of other objects (Barnett and Land, forthcoming). This is what is known as the 'political unconscious' of gift theory. Deconstruction de-centres the subject of moral obligation through a gesture of dispossession, showing that generosity is not quite straightforwardly in the gift of the subject as might be supposed. Derrida is certainly not alone in expressing his intense suspicion for the morality of symmetrical reciprocity put forth by anthropological conceptions of the gift. Young (1997), drawing on Derrida, Levinas and Irigary, has argued that it is in relations of *a*symmetrical reciprocity that the development of ethical relationships is enabled. For Young, the emphasis is not on the logic of ethical action; rather it is in relationships that escape the logic of contract and exchange altogether that one might glimpse a mode of relating that escapes the circularity and self possession of obligation. Her work seeks to recast questions of commitment—going beyond seeing obligation as establishing some sort of debt relationship between active moral subject and passive object of concern to suggest that ethical conduct is best exemplified by mundane everyday practices of love, devotion and sacrifice.

Similar arguments can also be deciphered from Elster's work on the relationship of altruism and self interest where he critically examines the possibility and moral superiority of a purely self-less act. As he puts it:

> Pure nonselfish behaviour is represented by anonymous contributions to impersonal charities….Only gifts from the unknown to unknown are unambiguously unselfish.
>
> (Elster, 1989: 55)

This argument finds great resonance with Derrida's idea that only an act that disavowed any return, one that could not be knowingly given as a gift, could accord the status of a pure gift: a pure gift cannot be recognized as a gift by another party (Barnett, 2005a). Elster (1989: 58) goes on to note that gift giving, as exemplary of altruistic conduct can all too easily "serve the interests of the donor." Generosity, as such, can also be a modality of power—a means of reproducing inequality and creating dependence. This is also the basis for Diprose's (2002) account of corporeal generosity. She is deeply concerned that many accounts of generosity uncritically sets up a bifurcation between a set of subjects in possession of things to be given and a set of subject to whom gifts are passed. Generosity can certainly be carried out by self interested individuals in order to be recognized as a good person and thus this might lead to a reproduction of unequal relations of possession. Diprose brings to our attention the extent to which the idea of generosity as an individual, altruistic value that motivates people to act towards others with no regard for their own self benefit continues to presume that generosity is a virtue that inheres wholly with those who are in possession.

The significance of this kind of argument is to rethink common, taken-for-granted understandings of the relations of generosity. What follows from Young's account of the ethics of asymmetrical reciprocity is that generosity must be embedded in relationships of responsiveness and attentiveness to others. Diprose on the other hand posits generosity as an embodied disposition of openness, a mode of relating that constitute the self as

affecting and affected by others. Such conceptions are highly important, as Coles (1997: 3) reminds us, because any generosity which does not understand itself to be "deeply rooted in a receptive encounter with others will proliferate a blindness, theft and imperialism despite its best efforts." Hence, to reiterate, generosity is not a regulative ideal but should be viewed as a constitutive practice of sociality, community and being together (Barnett and Land, forthcoming). Generosity should be thought as a modality of power since it is a practice through which people ordinarily act in concert to sustain relationships over time and space, relationships that enact their normative principles and which depend upon non-sovereign modes of selfhood. Generosity is also not a 'moral' concept at all, in so far as this I meant to imply a regulative ideal of some sort against which actualities of practice can be judged and evaluated by an impartial observer (Barnett and Land, forthcoming). The partiality of generosity must be emphasized since it cannot be universalized due to its emplacement within concrete encounters with others, however mediated these may be. This means that any given act of generosity must also exclude generosity to others. The 'withholding' of generosity is structurally embedded in the act of being generous (c.f. Berlant 2004). The possibility of generosity so to speak rests on the impossibility of pure generosity. However this is not a tragic dialectic; rather it is an indication of the extent to which this type of account of the motivation of generosity opens a space for the agency of objects of care, concern and obligation. An analysis of generosity would then look at the ways in which dispositions to respond to and to be receptive to others are worked up and how opportunities for acting on these dispositions are organised. This sort of analysis avoids the exhortatory mode so common in academic geography since it does not presume that being ethical depends on

overcoming self-regard and self-interest through a tenuous effort of monological reasoning. Generosity is mundane, ordinary and always undertaken in the company of others (Barnett and Land, forthcoming).

2.5 Concluding comments: Generosity and the IOT

Building on the debates about caring at a distance and geographies of responsibility discussed in this chapter, I have developed analyses of practices that suggest the limitations of both these paradigms. The theme of generosity illuminates an alternative pathway into a critical understanding of the relationships between giving and receiving, caring and being cared for. In particular, it challenges us to go beyond dualisms of active giving and passive receiving by thinking through, first, where appeals of concern, justice or care come from, and how they are articulated; second, the differential capacities of individuals or collective actors to be affected by and moved to certain claims but not to others. Such questions will no doubt re-orientate our attention towards the myriad practices through which dispositions towards public acknowledgement of the claims of others are worked up and maintained but more importantly, how such claims are consumed, (re)interpreted or even resisted.

What possibilities then do the concept of generosity offer for the analysis of Singaporeans' generous response to the IOT? Referring to the conceptual diagram presented below (**Figure 2.1**), by locating *where* appeals of generosity come from, the various pathways and conduits such as the state, NGOs and the media that brings Singaporeans into encounters with the needs of tsunami affected peoples and places are elucidated. Such mediated encounters will elicit various attentive responses including

volunteering and monetary donations from Singaporeans which will then direct our attention to the various motivations for them doing so. Understanding these motivations allows us to draw the intricate linkages between these impetuses to act and the appeals of generosity, but equally important, demonstrates how the actual conduct of generous practices involves the opening of oneself to another where Singaporeans' conceptions of the self are being actively constituted and/or refigured.

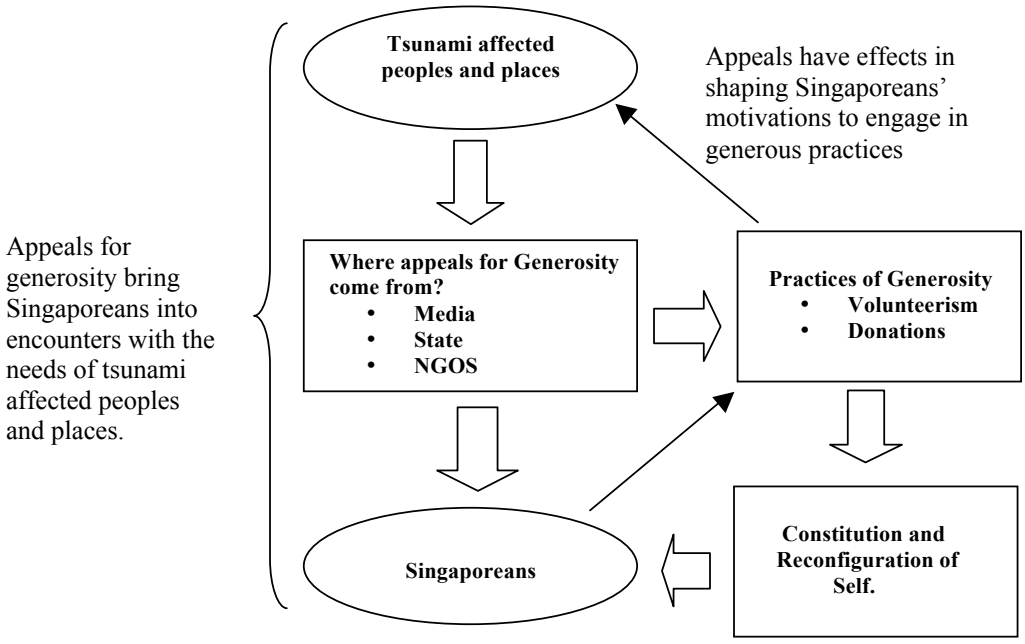

Figure 2.1 A conceptual framework to evaluate Singaporeans' response to the IOT

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

3.1 Preamble

In recent years, geographers have been increasingly aware of the ontological and epistemological assumptions that shape geographical research and determine how knowledge is being constructed. As Proctor (1999: 9) puts it, "geographical knowledge does not arise in a vacuum"; the choice of methodologies used to engage the 'field' determines the kinds of knowledges to be known. Hence if we think through this stage of research critically and allow multiple research practices to constitute legitimate research materials, the possibilities of generating 'new' ways of knowing will widen significantly. This chapter will offer an evaluation of the methodological avenues that I have ventured in order to gain a fuller appreciation of Singaporeans' generous practices to tsunami affected places and peoples. I adopt a 'triangulation' of methods (Dwyer and Limb, 2001) to enable more diverse ways of encountering the 'field' and to enhance the validity and reflexivity of my research process, where I can support my own 'situated knowledges' (Haraway, 1991) with my respondents' views and actions.

3.2 Research Performances

I engage with Pratt's (2000) notion of research performances to exemplify the fluidity of research practices and experiment with a broader repertoire of research strategies. As noted by Gregson and Rose (2000), the execution of research projects, their writing and their dissemination are good examples of academic performance. The researcher is often seen to be in control, writing in a matter-of-fact way, only to be constrained within the norms of established academic conventions and having to navigate around word limits. More often than not, the singularity with which many of us engage

our research—principally as textual products—meant that the university is enacted as a domain for the production, reproduction and conservation of textual knowledges. This, I argue, is an extremely restrictive understanding of what we actually do as researchers and our actual research performances go largely (un)remarked even though they clearly exceed the written trace. Hence I seek to address Pratt's (2000) call for more critical reflexive thinking of the research *process* that far exceeds what can merely be represented in our written performances. The actual *doing* of research constitutes a fragmented space of fissures and gaps, often spinning into unexpected situations far beyond the researcher's predictability (Pratt, 2000). The supposed writing spaces that I occupy as detached, stable and in control researcher can be problematized if I use reflexivity beyond a mere citational practice. **Table 3.1** shows an excerpt from my field journal that exemplifies the 'messy' disruptive research performances. Reflexive accounts are not ones in which the researcher is firmly located: they are accounts in which absences, fallibilities and moments that require translation are brought into visibility (c.f. Rose, 1997). Indeed, Valentine (2002: 126) argues that it is through the exploration of such moments that we might begin to "de-centre our research assumptions and question the certainties that slip into the way we produce knowledge." During the process of my research, the aims and objectives of my thesis changed rather substantially too. For example, I began the research without taking into consideration the influence of religion on 'caring' practices and issues to do with morality. Yet as they figured more prominently, I decided to conduct a focus group with volunteers from the Buddhist Research Society and also interview the administrative officer of the organization.

Bennett *et al* (2003: 93) argue that this is a valid way of selecting the focus of research as long as the researcher carefully monitors the process.

Table 3.1 Field Journal

Transcribed Qualitative interview excerpts	**Field Journal**
Date: 19 June 2006 (Midway through the interview at a Café in Khao Lat) Chih Yuan (CY): When you are carrying out those works like for example, constructing houses or making visitations to the victims, what are some of the difficulties that you experienced? Also what are some of the ways that you try to get around such problems that you encounter? Lai Yee (LY): Before I answer your questions, [I] just want to point out something to you. Please never ever use the word "victims" in front of the local people who are affected by the tsunami. It has a very negative meaning… well I mean some of them may not mind but I have seen some who react quite badly to the word 'victim'…. CY: But I don't mean it in a negative way… (being somewhat adamant). I am just using… LY: (intercepts) Yes, I get what you mean. I have no problems with this term but you have to be sensitive to the feelings of the local people. Victim, to some of them equates pitiful, dependent and they don't want to be identified in such ways.	I interviewed Sheryl Lim, a volunteer who is rendering help in the tsunami-affected areas in Khao Lat, Thailand. I was conscious of the "victim" label which has been widely critiqued in academic literature because it connotes a lack of agency. Yet I thought I could traverse the complexities easily by defining my use of the term right from the start—victim as someone who has been affected by an adverse circumstance (the tsunami in this case). Yet I neglected the lived experiences of those respondents who have been through the tsunami and may want to 'dis-identify' with this label which they deem as derogatory As Kim England (1994: 86) reminds us, "[r]eflexivity can make us more aware of asymmetrical or exploitative relationships, but it cannot remove them." It is only at this instance when I finally understand that this is an ongoing paradox that I may not ultimately resolve.

Furthermore, disruptive performances during the research process were also brought into 'being' through ongoing negotiations of ethical and emotional issues. Initially, I had intended to conduct in-depth interviews with some of the local Thai people

who have been affected by the tsunami. After four interviews that went relatively well, my initial trepidation in talking to the 'victims' of the tsunami receded, especially when I had enlisted the help of my friend who was fluent in Thai to engage in the necessary translations. However the subsequent interview I had with a Thai respondent was an account that went through considerable emotional upheaval. As I was going through the guiding set of questions from my aide memoir with him, he seemed rather reserved in his replies to many of the questions. However I was completely intrigued by his encounters with the tsunami as they provided perfect justifications to the several crucial arguments of my thesis. As the interview proceeded, he became visibly emotional which culminated in the following outburst, "I can't continue [with the interview]….my brother has already died in the tsunami. It's too painful…painful…" (translated from Thai). He started letting out groans of anguish which left me stunned. Abandoning the interview became my only 'escape' out of an unexpected situation that relinquished my self-assumed mastery over this interview space. My internal struggles with guilt, shame and inadequacy over my respondent's emotional doldrums have become debilitating and even 'paralyzing', impeding my research. Even though my aide memoir has not proved problematic for the past interviews and I was cautious in the phrasing of my questions given the sensitivity of the topic, it is highly difficult to predict emotional outcomes since I am dealing with human 'subjects' (see Anderson and Smith, 2005; Bondi, 2005). This incident affirmed my resolution to discontinue future interviews with peoples affected by the tsunami, with *ethical responsibility* being my main consideration. As Philo (2005) alerts us to the theme of wound(ing) in relation to vulnerable, victimized and disadvantaged peoples, attuned

attention should be placed on the *ethics* in the representation and memoralization of the pain of the wounded, specifically in avoiding the re-opening of these scarred wounds.

In another vivid encounter, the seepage of emotions into the research process also induced an unanticipated change to my research site. My original intention was to focus on some of the volunteer projects carried out by Singaporeans on tsunami-hit Phuket Island. However during my 'field' visit to Phuket, I was somewhat disgusted with the outward propagation of tourism by the Thai government under the guise of the so-called 'memorial service' that was due to take place on the first anniversary of the tsunami. From posters all over the island donning the caption "Phuket welcomes you to one year in memory of the tsunami" to the various events such as volleyball competitions and seafood fair that were supposedly part of the memorial service, a seemingly (perverse) celebratory atmosphere was overwhelming. My contempt with all these developments were further reinforced when my interviews with 'victims' of the disaster revealed their disdain for this official 'memorial service', rationalizing it as a highly insensitive staged performance for 'western' tourists. Haunted by my uneasiness in doing tsunami research under such circumstances, I gave up Phuket as my research site. Allowing feelings of repulsion to come into play in the research process should not be subjected to outright critique (c.f. Widdowfield, 2000; Bondi, 2005); rather the insertion of emotions into research process enabled me a fuller appreciation of how emotional exchanges are able to orientate researchers differently during the conduct of research (Laurie and Parr, 1999).

3.3 'Field' Techniques

Historically, there is a constructed dualism between qualitative and quantitative knowledge, with the latter always privileged as being legitimate (Mattingly and Falconer Al-Hindi, 1995). Arising out of the 'quantitative revolution' in geography, quantitative methods were developed with the intention of making geography a scientific discipline where the validity of knowledge can be justified according to positivist principles. However recent postcolonial and feminist interventions have challenged the arbitrary divide between qualitative and quantitative research methodologies and methods, preferring instead to view them as being on a continuum (WGSG, 1997). Indeed, it is possible for a study to employ a multi-method approach: quantitative methods to search for interesting trends and qualitative to aid in the understanding of those trends (see Lawson, 1995; Mclafferty, 1995). As Kwan (2002) asserts, this strategy of 'triangulation' has advantage because the weaknesses of each single method may be compensated by the counter-balancing strength of another. In what follows, I seek to show my practical considerations in adopting the multi-method approach to enhance understanding of the multiple generous practices by Singaporeans.

3.3.1 Large scale Quantitative survey

Large scale quantitative survey is an instrument of data construction "comprising a carefully structured and ordered set of questions designed to obtain the needed information without ambiguity or bias" (Johnston, 2000: 668). A survey is useful when the data required are based on the responses of a large number of people in order for certain patterns or trends to be deciphered (Cloke *et al*, 2004). For my research,

purposive sampling was employed in order to ensure that only Singaporeans who have engaged in donations (monetary or material gifts) to peoples/places affected by the tsunami are selected to participate in the survey. This method was not applied to gain understanding to volunteering practices by Singaporeans as it is highly difficult to access the embodied experiences of such acts through a structured survey. These participants were identified with the help of my network of friends and subsequently 'snowballed' from there. Special attention was paid to how representative the respondents are in relation to the Singapore population, using age, gender and ethnicity as stratification variables (**Table 3.2**). Critical self-reflexivity was constantly carried out while I was formulating the questions for the survey as there was an explicit recognition on my part of the diversity and complexity of categories of constructs. A total of 200 questionnaires were sent out with 187 of them returned complete.

Table 3.2 Profile of Large-scale Quantitative Survey Respondents

Stratification Variable	**Percentage (%)**
Age	
20-29 years old	22
30-39 years old	18
40-49 years old	20
50 years old and above	21
Gender	
Male	52
Female	48
Ethnicity	
Chinese	76
Malay	17
Indians	5
Others	2

3.3.2 Participant Observation

Participant observation is most closely associated with social anthropology (see Sanjek, 1990) and significantly, its profile among the repertoire of approaches used by human geographers have been heightened by Peter Jackson (1983) who received training in both geography and anthropology. The key concern of this method is to develop understanding through being part of the spontaneity of everyday interactions (Kearns, 2000). As such, Evans (1988) purports the wider usage of participant observation in social sciences since it arguably has the ability to put respondents at ease by integrating the researcher into the 'flow' of everyday life. In my study, considerable time (May-August 2005 and February-March 2006) was spent observing two groups of volunteers from Singapore working on rebuilding projects in Thailand. The first group was a team from Red Cross (Singapore) involved in the construction of a school in Khao Lat while the second team was from the organization Mercy Relief in charge of rebuilding houses on Kho Phi Phi Island. The main focus of my observations was not to scrutinize their volunteer activities; rather I was more interested in the internal dynamics of the relief team and the interactions of these volunteers with the local Thais who have been affected by the tsunami. While my initial impetus was to join one group in such volunteering practices, it did not materialize due to the extended period of the project (six months) conflicting with my school commitments.

The main drawback involves the loss of detachment as a result of being intimate with a group of people over a substantial period of time (c.f. Dowler, 2001; Bennett, 2003a). Indeed, many moral dilemmas grappled me at many points during my research: Is it appropriate to reveal intimate details that were confided in me? What position (a

friend or researcher) did I take up when such revelations were made? However the use of this method can be justified as the nature of volunteering meant that many of the experiences, dynamics and interactions of the studied group can be more meaningfully teased out during the performing of work *in place*.

3.3.3 In-depth interviews

A total of 42 qualitative interviews were conducted between October 2005 and November 2006 (**Table 3.3**). Smith (2001: 24) identifies qualitative interviews to be useful in discerning a "multiplicity of meanings, representations and practices." This method is adopted so as to recognize the diversity of opinions and experiences in order to gain deeper insights into the processes shaping our social worlds. Out of 42 Singaporeans interviewed, 20 of them were active donors to the tsunami while another 18 were involved in volunteer work. These donors are all participants of the quantitative survey who had indicated in the questionnaire that they could be contacted at a later date for interviews. Volunteers were mainly identified through my network of friends, with the exception of a few whom I met when I was conducting my participant observation. All donors and volunteers were asked about their motivations and experiences in carrying out generous practices. Interviews were also conducted with the administrative officers of the Singapore Red Cross, Buddhist Research Society and *The Straits Times* to find out more about their efforts in eliciting generous responses from Singaporeans. All of my interviewees agreed to be taped and issues of confidentiality were discussed prior to the taping. Furthermore, they also showed little hesitation in allowing me to use their real names or initials. However, the presence of the tape recorder (an object) had some effects

on my respondents (subjects of research), albeit to varying degrees. This enfolding of subject and object undoubtedly influenced the way the interviews proceeded and the kinds of geographical subjectivities produced (Matless, 2000). I was very apologetic when my respondent Su-anne heaved a sigh of relief after I switched off the tape recorder. In other instances, more 'insider' details were revealed after the taping ceased.

It has been widely acknowledged that the research process is inherently exploitative (WGSG, 1997; Bondi *et al*, 2002; Cloke *et al*, 2004) but Bennett (2003b) rightly points out that interviews make a researcher sensitive to differences and contradictions. One of my respondents refused further contact. I was perplexed as I thought the interview went fairly smoothly. In retrospect, I realized that I may have pushed too hard for some details which were unrelated to the person's work. The geographical locations to conduct the interviews were carefully chosen as well. Most of the interviews were carried out in cafes which are quasi-public spaces where the individuals feel comfortable about sharing their stories. Cafes, as espoused by Philo (2004) are spaces of democracy where people can interact freely in embodied ways.

Table 3.3 Profile of In-depth Interview Respondents

Name	**Age**	**Sex**	**Location of interview**
Donors			
Ang, Joyce	28	F	Starbucks Café (Singapore)
Geetha	34	F	Coffee Bean Café (Singapore)
Mdm Goh	62	F	MacDonalds Restaurant (Singapore)
Goh, Terry	28	M	McDonalds Restaurant (Singapore)
Ho Kee Boon	25	M	Starbucks Café (Singapore)
Lee Beng Kiat	30	M	Starbucks Café (Singapore)
Lee, Su-anne	24	F	Starbucks Café (Singapore)
Lieow, Casper	27	M	Starbucks Café (Singapore)
Mr Lim	47	M	Café in Orchard Road (Singapore)
Lim, Jac	27	F	Raffles Hotel Café (Singapore)
Liu Pei Chin	42	F	Coffee Club Express (Singapore)

Name	Age	Sex	Location of interview
Donors			
Mr Lui	46	M	Coffee Club Express (Singapore)
Ong Peck Choo	59	F	Starbucks Café (Singapore)
Tan, Joe	42	M	Starbucks Café (Singapore)
Tan, Jonathan	31	M	Gelare Café (Singapore)
Tan, Sharon	35	F	Café in Simei (Singapore)
Toh, Lynn	39	F	Gelare Café (Singapore)
Wee Richard	32	M	Café in Raffles Place (Singapore)
Yeo Eng Guan	27	M	Café Biz (Singapore)
Volunteers			
Chan, Liana	41	F	Starbucks Cafe (Singapore)
Chew, Florence	42	F	Methodist Church (Singapore)
Chong, Serene	28	F	Reconstruction site (Phi Phi Island)
Foo Lai Yee	25	F	Black Canyon Coffee Café (Khao Lat)
Koh Lai Geok	31	F	Café (Phi Phi Island)
Mr Kwek	38	M	Black Canyon Coffee Café (Khao Lat)
Lim Ka Huat	33	M	Black Canyon Coffee Café (Khao Lat)
Lim, Jane	42	F	Café (Phi Phi Island)
Lin, Shaun	34	M	Black Canyon Coffee Café (Khao Lat)
Mrs Low	47	F	Coffee house (Phi Phi Island)
Dr Ong Jit Kuan	34	M	Pasir Laba Camp (Singapore)
Seah Chee Siong	29	M	Reconstruction site (Phi Phi Island)
Mr Sng	43	M	Restaurant (Khao Lat)
Tan, Joanne	26	F	Coffee House (Phi Phi Island)
Tan, Kevin	31	M	Black Canyon Coffee Café (Khao Lat)
Captain Tan Leong Boon	35	M	Seletar Camp (Singapore)
Tan Raynard	27	M	National Junior College (Singapore)
Teo Caroline	30	F	Starbucks Café (Singapore)
Yeo, Corrine	36	F	Restaurant (Phi Phi Island)
Administrative Officers			
Miss Lim	29	F	Buddhist Research Society Meeting Room
Miss Teo	31	F	Singapore Red Cross Meeting Room
Mr Tan Yi Hui	27	M	Singapore Press Holdings Meeting Room

3.3.4 Focus Group

A focus group provides a different kind of resource by placing individuals in a group context where conversations can develop and flourish in what could be considered more commonplace social situations than being interviewed for a questionnaire survey

(Lunt and Livingstone, 1996). Focus group methodology is premised on the notion that we develop knowledge in context and in relation to others. By creating the opportunities for dialogue between people, individuals are free to challenge the interpretations or assumptions of other group members. This dialogic characteristic of the focus group gives the researcher "access to the multiple and transpersonal understandings that characterize social behavior" (Goss, 1996: 118). For the purpose of this study, focus groups can be useful in eliciting shared spatial experiences and strategies of Singapore volunteers working together on a project in foreign contexts (**Table 3.4**). However, caution has to be administered in managing the focus group in terms of group composition—size of the group, gender, age and social status (see Bedford and Burgess, 2001). More critically, the researcher has to play a facilitator role, moderating the discussion by encouraging exploration of a topic, elicit agreements and disagreements, curbing talkative group members and encouraging quiet participants (Cameron, 2000). My own experience during one session where a dominant individual never stopped talking and claimed authority to speak on behalf of the others got me to rethink issues of representation and group dynamics. After the group had dispersed, another group member came back to tell me that the vociferous individual was not representing their volunteering work fairly. I had to make sure in the subsequent sessions that the views of that individual did not remain hegemonic through inviting alternative or even counteractive comments from the rest of the group.

While the merits of focus groups have increasingly been documented by geographers (Burgess, 1996; Holbrook and Jackson, 1996; Bennett, 2003b), Kong (1998) however eschews over-romanticizing the universal application of the focus group

method. She argues that when conducting focus groups in an Asian context, "people remain reticent if issues are sensitive or deeply personal" and there is "little to be gained from the social context generated by group discussion" (Kong, 1998: 81). Indeed, Kong's observations were clearly manifested in one of my focus group with eight volunteers working together on an extended rebuilding project for six months. Despite my efforts in eliciting responses by asking provocative questions, the group was not forthcoming or in some instances even appeared rather uncomfortable with their replies. It was only after that session when one group member wrote me an email proclaiming that many of them could not express their views freely as they had issues with specific individuals and raising them might strain relations which in turn could result in adverse repercussions in administering volunteering work. As Pratt (2002: 226) argues, focus groups have the "potential of being exploitative because participants are persuaded by the artificiality of the context to reveal intimate details in front of peers with whom they will interact long after the research is over and the researcher gone." Hampered by such circumstances, I decided to abandon the focus group method for this particular group of participants and conduct one-to-one interviews instead. Nonetheless, I had considerable success with two other focus groups, where I enjoyed three fulfilling sessions with each group.

Table 3.4 Profile of Focus Group Discussion Respondents

Name	**Age**	**Sex**	**Type of Activities involved**	**Location of Focus group discussion**
Chan, Joshua Lim Siok Heng Ng Pek Chng	31 34 29	M F F	Building of Schools and Houses; Taking care of homeless Children	Café (Phi Phi Island)
Chua, Daniel Goh, Jacky Lee, Kenny	22 21 22	M M M	Logistics team: distributing of food items and medical supplies	Starbucks (Singapore)

3.3.5 Discourse and Textual Analysis

There are two main strands of discourse analysis. The first involves the semantic scrutiny of political rhetoric and how certain issues are framed with the exclusion of others (Lees, 2004). As such, newspaper reports, critical commentaries related to the tsunami and ministerial speeches are placed side by side for comparative purposes. This is extremely useful in discerning sympathetic stands or extremist positions. In addition, this method was also fruitfully employed to critically examine various institutions' statements of appeals for generous responses from Singaporeans. The second strand of discourse analysis is derived from a Foucauldian perspective. This is empirically less rich but nonetheless involves the researchers' analysis of inherent power relations emerging from the 'field'. I adopt a mixed method by combining both strands of discourse analysis.

With regards to the plethora of tsunami images that are analyzed in this thesis, I engage with Rose's (2001) guide to visual methodologies that purports for a more critical approach to interpreting visual images. Premising on the notion that visual representations have their own effects and should thus be taken seriously, Rose implores us to (a) think about the social conditions and effects of visual objects and (b) be reflexive about one's own way of looking at images. These visual methodologies are used to guide my inter-subjective interpretation of images produced by peoples of diverse backgrounds.

3.4 Chapter Summary

The knowledges produced by the repertoire of research strategies are situated and necessarily partial. This chapter has tried to emphasize that there is much to be known

through the *doing* of research. Insofar that research is a performance, I have tried to exemplify that the written traces, for example, this text, are but one outcome of a process that far exceeds them. At the same time, the writing of this text has allowed me to appreciate how fully my collaboration with my respondents has transformed my research practice.

CHAPTER FOUR

PATHWAYS AND CONDUITS IN APPEALS FOR GENEROSITY

4.1 Preamble

This chapter aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the myriad practices through which dispositions towards claims of tsunami-affected peoples and places are worked up and maintained. There are many conduits and pathways within Singapore that expose people to information relating to the IOT. However I argue that such knowledge does not necessarily translate into practical actions by Singaporeans to help in tsunami relief. As exemplified in Chapter 2, the 'geographies of responsibility' and 'caring at a distance' literature assumes that knowledge of distant outcomes is a prerequisite for responsible action. Such a causal relation can only engage in *moral suasions* in hope that people would act, but provide no *compelling reason* for them to do so. Hence to understand the *mechanisms* that induce Singaporeans' generous behaviour, the focus here will be on the multiple modes of agency that engage in appeals of care for this event and how such appeals are being articulated. I argue that these various agencies and their appeals attempt to draw Singaporeans into responsive and attentive relations of (mediated) encounters with the needs of peoples affected by the tsunami. Thus through a critical analysis of the dominant representations of the tsunami that are permeated through the Singapore media, I purport that inter-textual references by the local state and organizational infrastructures to these discursive constructions seek to delineate moral boundaries of 'appropriate' conduct in responding to the 'victims' of the IOT by Singaporeans. In what follows, attuned attention will be given to scrutinize media coverage of the IOT by the biggest news operator in Singapore: *The Straits Times* (ST). I contend that Greg Bankoff's (2001; 2003; 2004) exploration of the intricate links between ideas of vulnerability, tropicality and development will provide a good

framework for the discourse analysis of ST's forays into tsunami reporting. Subsequently, I will seek to show how such media representations are taken up and intertwined with (a) the state's promulgation of generous practices by Singaporeans as desired citizenry conduct; and (b) NGOs promotion of similar practices by Singaporeans according to their organizational ethos at the sub-national scale.

4.2 Rendering the World Unsafe: Discourses of Tropicality, Development and Vulnerability

Representation entails a set of practices by which meanings are constituted and communicated. Such representational practices produce and circulate meanings among members of social groups and these meanings can be defined as culture (Duncan, 2000). Representations not only reflect reality but they help to constitute reality; hence, they are never neutral or innocent of power relations (see Said, 1978; 1994). This proffers important insights into the *agency* involved in the creation of these representations and the audience for whom they are intended. As such, revelations about dominant perceptions and presumptions of validity as well as issues of marginalized interests are duly illuminated. That is why both presence and absence are imperative in the analysis of representations. Furthermore, it is now widely acknowledged that representations have material effects (see Barnes and Duncan, 1991); hence it is important to critically examine how the IOT is being constructed so as to investigate the agency of these representations in motivating Singaporeans to engage in generous practices.

ST is chosen as the analytical foci for the representation of the IOT in Singapore due to its wide readership and extensive coverage of Asian news. Accredited with impressive statistics such as 42% local readership and daily circulation of over 300,000

copies, ST has indeed occupied a hegemonic (and almost unsurpassable) position in Singapore's printed media industry (SPH official website). As Skelton (2006) points out succinctly, highly popular and dominant media (such as ST) have specific powers which are produced by its authors, photographers and editors: the power to name, the power to represent commonsense, the power to create 'official' versions and the power to represent the legitimate social world. For the case of disasters such as the IOT, environmental historian Greg Bankoff (2001) has made similar pleas to pay heightened attention to the power relations that are imbued in the discursive constructions of natural hazards, particularly those emanating from the 'West'. Recurring themes of tropicality, development and vulnerability, according to Bankoff, can be uncovered from these disaster representations. In what follows, a brief outline of these Bankoff's arguments shall be presented, elucidating their practical relevance for a critical reading of ST's reports relating to the IOT.

In his widely cited work, Bankoff (2001) is concerned that the discursive framework within which hazards are presented and analyzed, that of vulnerability, has problematic historical roots. He argues that its use might affect parts of the world which are imagined and represented in negative ways. The basic premise hinges on the arbitrary bifurcation of the world into 'us' which refers to the West (particularly Europe and North America) and 'them' which connotes everywhere else, especially the equatorial zones (see Robinson 2006; Radcliffe, 2005). Tropicality, development and vulnerability then form part of one and the same "essentialising and generalizing cultural discourse that denigrates large regions of the world (the 'them') as disease-ridden, poverty-stricken and disaster-prone" (Bankoff, 2001: 19).

The discourse of tropicality (Arnold, 1996) primarily delineates the equatorial zones as dangerous because of disease and the threat to health. Bankoff traces back historically to 17th and 18th centuries to consider the ways in which Europe's representation of the 'tropics' was based upon dangers to human health, the pathology of 'warm' climates. The heat and humidity were increasingly held responsible for the high death rate of Europeans. Disease, putrefaction and decay ran rampant in the moist warm air of the tropics. However with increased understanding of infection and role of germs there were significant developments in Western medicine that could 'cure' the regions that were deemed as dangerous.

Subsequently, a new discursive framework was conceived, which built upon tropicality but did not totally replace it and this was development. There was a drive to replicate the socio-economic features and practices of the 'West': industrialization, urbanization, growth rates, improved living standards and education. The 'West' came up with aid policies and divided the world into two: donor and recipient nations, First World and Third World, core and periphery. This inter-related chain of binaries is reductionist in nature, reifying the latter to a homogenized, culturally undifferentiated mass of humanity variously associated with powerlessness, passivity, ignorance, hunger, illiteracy, neediness, oppression and inertia (Escobar, 1995)

The final discourse which Bankoff alludes to is that of vulnerability which operates very much in congruence to previous concepts of tropicality and development. The idea of vulnerability was proposed to question the hitherto unchallenged assumption that the greater incidence of disasters was due to the rising number of purely natural physical phenomena. Vulnerability directs attention to the historical and social

dimensions of disasters and establishes the conviction that societies are able to avoid or ameliorate disasters through technocratic solutions. Hewitt (1983) purports that this technocratic approach had permitted disasters to be treated as a specialized problem for the advanced research of scientists, engineers and bureaucrats, and so be appropriated within a discourse of expertise that quarantines disaster in thought as well as in practice. It also renders culpable such populations (or at least their governments) which are blamed for their lack of adequate knowledge and preparedness that had the opportunity to reduce risk but failed to do so (Varley, 1994). While Bankoff recognizes the value of such an approach, he is uneasy at how the 'vulnerable' populations are conceptualized and represented. Vulnerable populations are those most at risk because of a marginality which makes their lives one of permanent emergency. Vulnerability denies people the means of coping with disasters, presenting them as weak, passive and pathetic.

However this discourse of vulnerability, no less than the concepts of tropicality and development, also classifies certain regions and areas as unsafe because people do not have the capacity to cope and survive in the event of a disaster. It is still a paradigm for framing the world in such a way that it effectively divides it into two, between a zone where disasters occur regularly and one where they occur infrequently. Moreover, the former has much the same geography as the tropics or the Third World. But the dangerous condition is now identified as hazard rather than disease or poverty. Not only are the latter dangers superseded but neatly subsumed with the current paradigms as sub-variants. The new geography establishes "defenceless spaces with its pattern of frailties and absent protection and spaces of vulnerability determined by lack of entitlement, enfranchisement and empowerment" (Bankoff, 2001: 26).

4.3 Discursive construction of the IOT by ST

As pointed out in the preceding section, discourses of tropicality, development and vulnerability will be employed as a framework to critically examine ST's coverage of the IOT. While Bankoff's work revolves around Western representations of disasters and hazards, I argue that it can be extended to my analysis as Singapore has always been the more economically privileged country in the Asian region and perhaps more importantly spared from the destructive forces of the IOT. Whilst I am certainly not suggesting the tenuous binary of Singapore/Superior and Tsunami Affected Countries/Subordinate, it shall be highlighted that ST's discursive practice is very much framed by hegemonic representations of *us* and *them*, showing connectivity with the problematic aspects of vulnerability discourse as well as providing echoes of tropicality and development. Throughout the images and articles that appeared in ST, there were a series of discourses and tropes that emerged repeatedly. I specifically draw upon two significant tropes within ST's coverage that demonstrate predominant discourses around natural hazards and disasters which also illustrate Bankoff's critical engagement as well. There is little doubt that ST is a significant pathway that exposes Singaporeans to the IOT. However I would like to suggest that it is the dramatized (selective) representations of ST—playing up the great extent of destruction and the pitiful state of 'victims' desperately in need of help—that seek to elicit generous responses from Singaporeans.

4.3.1 Vulnerability and Tropicality: Tropes of death, decay and disease

One of the most recurring tropes through language and imagery is that of bodies. It is not possible to go into all the configurations of aspects of the representations here;

hence I want to pull out the elements that demonstrate what Bankoff terms as tropicality—the presence of deadly diseases closely associated with 'warm climates'. It is also connected to vulnerability because of the assumed risk of disease which threatens the survivors.

The coverage by ST arguably constitutes some sort of (perverse) fetishism with bodies. More often than not, they are referred to as corpses. Despite this obsession with bodies, I purport that these representations are dis-embodied in nature, with image after image showing assemblies of corpses thrown together, unidentified and unclaimed. In the immediate day after the IOT, the front page of ST featured a disturbing picture of innumerous bodies being laid out on the streets of Banda Aceh (**Figure 4.1**). An equally dramatic commentary to this image ensued:

Fig 4.1 Bodies being laid out on the streets of Banda Aceh

> Beaches turned into cemeteries yesterday as Asia mourned over the 22,500 lives snuffed out by Sunday's tsunamis. In Banda Aceh (right), it was hard to find a dry place to bury the bodies. The Thai King lost a grandson. Sri Lanka pleaded utter helplessness. And Andaman's many islands, that may yield the worst casualties, remain cut off from the world.
> (ST, 28 December 2004)

It is hardly surprising that one of the constructions around these bodies is their sheer number. While specific figures for the death toll are not known in the early reports, we are told that there are bodies everywhere. In tourists areas there are bodies on the beach—something we might expect but they are not sunbathers, they are corpses. In other non-tourist places such as Banda Aceh, the bodies are always described and being shown on the streets.

On December 29, a report from India was exceptionally attention grabbing given its sensationalized heading, "The Big Exodus". One of the two pictures showed a mass grave with the caption: *Grim toll—a heap of bodies of tidal waves victims in Kolachal, in India's Tamil Nadu state, being prepared for burial yesterday* (**Figure 4.2**).

Figure 4.2 Heap of bodies for burial (Tamil Nadu)

The second image, yet another bodily representation, however featured one woman wailing on a seemingly empty beach, with her prayers forming the caption: *I hope and pray that we can at least find my children's bodies so that we can see them one last time and give them a decent burial* (**Figure 4.3**). Bodies still continue to dominate the pages of ST.

Figure 4.3 Woman wailing on an empty beach

However, bodies did not remain merely as numbers; alternative discourses in ST constructed them as diseased and hence risky. Correspondents from various regions began sending back stories about decomposing bodies due to their exposure in tropical heat and the lack of proper health and burial facilities:

> Streets of pulverized buildings were strewn with rotting bodies….there are critical shortages of body bags and disinfectant.
>
> (ST, 28 December 2004)

> Soldiers and volunteers worked throughout the day, unloading blocks of dry ice and placing them on and around the bodies to prevent further decomposition in the hot weather.
>
> (ST, 1 January 2005)

While still ridden with reference to bodies and corpses, reports started to focus on these bodies being bloated, contorted, beyond recognition, unidentified, buried under rubble, uncollected, putrefying, smelling mangled, rotting in the open, falling apart in the sun. These bodies then become a risk; they are seen as a potential cause of disease which threatens survivors. In the article titled "Epidemic Warning" (ST, 3 January 2005), there are snapshots reports from various tsunami-hit countries which allude to disease:

> India: A volunteer said that the danger of epidemics was growing by the hour.
>
> Sri Lanka: "It smells so bad…The rotting human bodies are mixed in with dead animals like dogs, fish, cats and goats…There is going to be an outbreak of diseases soon"
>
> Banda Aceh: The government fears the rapid spread of cholera and dysentery. "We are trying to give the bodies a proper burial but there are so many of them," said Dr Indrawadi Tamin, from the national disaster handling agency

With discourses such as risks, epidemic and danger permeating through the pages of ST, coupled with dramatic pictures depicting excessive destruction and deaths, there are indications of situations spinning out of control. Actions are urgently needed to alleviate such critical circumstances which incidentally inform the next discussion.

4.3.2 Vulnerability and Development Discourses: Tropes of aid, relief and expertise

In the immediate aftermath of the IOT, ST began to feature commentaries and details of the 'relief' operation. Two interesting observations can be made: first, there are a plethora of reports focusing specifically on 'western' aid and outline the donations of 'wealthy' nations and the activities of international (but largely 'western' based) NGOs and relief organizations. Hence we heard the voices of many European countries and America, and not forgetting the efforts of organizations such as Oxfam, Red Cross and the United Nations. Second, being part of the Singapore media, it is perhaps not surprising that Singapore's role in helping disaster stricken places were hugely publicized by ST.

On December 28, there was a column dedicated to update on relief efforts. Under the striking heading of "Help pours in from around the world", there were listings of various countries' contributions to the tsunami hit countries. The list was extremely western centric in that only countries/organizations such as Australia, Britain, Canada, France, EU and UN were included and they seek to represent the 'world' as the caption suggested. The image that came with this article featured an American Aircraft, loaded with medicine, food and other supplies bound for South India (**Figure 4.4**). Indeed such a trend is not an exception but an epitome for the Western-centricity of ST's coverage of foreign aid. Implicit within such discourses is a clear division between donors and recipients. Hardly mentioned was what those affected countries were doing and giving. They are shown as passive, unable to cope, dependent on external and largely 'western' aid.

Figure 4.4 American Aircraft loaded with supplies to help in tsunami relief

In alarmingly similar fashion, ST's representations of Singapore's aid also reinforced the dependency of tsunami countries on foreign help. On 4 January 2005, an annotated map was produced to show the deployment of troops and equipment by Singapore in the tsunami affected countries (**Figure 4.5**). What is striking here is the language. Singapore is constructed as givers and the countries, by default, receivers. The verbs associated with the actions of Singapore are: preparing to send; mobilizing; distributing; deploying; providing; flying in; sending; setting up; arranging (ST, 4 January 2005a). Hence, Singapore is always constructed as active, 'agentic' and 'doing' something; the tsunami affected countries are all in receipt, accepting and passive.

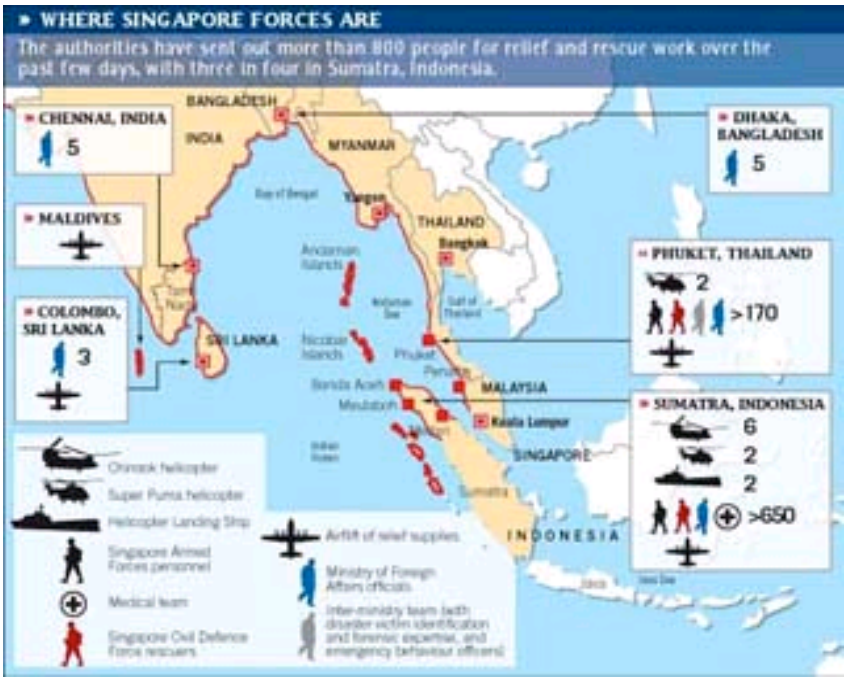

Figure 4.5 Geographical Representations of Troop Deployment by Singapore

In addition, embedded within all these discourse of giving/aid/relief, there is also the notion of 'outside' expertise arriving in the affected countries. Implicit within much of the discussion is that external aid agencies know best and they are fearful that local contexts will not make the best use of the resources sent in. The underlying connotations of chaos and a lack of systematic structures seemed to form the dominant geographical imagination of these places ravaged by the IOT.

> Complaint and criticism are mounting over Jakarta's disaster management performance. Domestic volunteers have expressed the most frustration. But they are also joined by international relief agencies and foreign militaries which have found their work hampered by a combination of a slow-moving bureaucracy and a hazy ground-level command structure to oversee the crisis.
>
> (ST, 8 January 2005)

> No dearth of aid but lack of coordination is causing inefficient distribution of food
>
> (ST, 4 January 2005b)

These commentaries undoubtedly depict a sense of dependency and victimhood; help is desperately needed for these affected countries to get back to normality. Couched in the context of external aid and support, there is little acknowledgment of locally based practices or knowledge.

4.4 Cultivating the 'Singapore Soul': Care and Compassion as a way of life

This section will focus on the appeals for care and generous practices by the Singapore state. Within Singapore, there is a strong tradition of the state being actively involved in the promulgation of civic participation in showing care and compassion for other fellow citizens. The state constantly emphasizes that while Singapore's economic success is a source of national pride, economics alone is insufficient ground to cultivate a sense of rootedness among Singaporeans. "A nation requires a 'national' culture to substantiate its geographically delineated boundaries" (Chua, 1995: 14). Deeply concerned that Singapore might become a "five-star hotel" rather than a "home", Brigadier General George Yeo (1991: 4) proclaims that a "Singapore soul" needs to be cultivated to prevent the undesirable consequence of having 'rootless' citizens:

> If we are not to be only a hotel, we must have a soul. To develop that soul, we need a lively civic society. When Singaporeans in their little platoons struggle to make life better for themselves but care for their fellow countrymen and community, they develop affections and traditions which make our hotel a home

Citizens are urged to be socially responsible, not just for their family but their community as well. This reflected one of the core values in 1991 Shared Values philosophy—'Nation before community and community before self'—which "engendered values like social discipline, social solidarity and community responsibility" (Chua, 1995: 152). As such, being able to show care and engage in meaningful practices to help fellow Singaporeans are celebrated as a model for "right living", one that is obligatory of an ethical citizen who desires the good for his/her community (Matless, 1995). Hoping that such values will be materialized and embodied by Singaporeans, the state has embarked on many policy initiatives such as the setting up of National Council of Social Services (which encourages the formation of Voluntary Welfare Organizations to help needy Singaporeans) to provide avenues for citizens to make monetary donations and/or carry out volunteering work (for works on related to volunteering in Singapore, see Chiang, 2005; Vasoo, 2002; Teo *et al*, 2006). This is clearly in line with what Prime Minister Lee (2004) envisions for Singapore: to become a '*caring nation*'.

However, many political observers have been wary about an outright lauding of Singapore's efforts in harnessing a 'caring nation'. They argue that such moves by the state are very much tied to its own political motivations and strategies, and invariably complementary to the existing ideological rubric (Chua, 1995; Tan, 2001). The 'communitarian' ideology espoused by the state attempts to shift caring responsibilities to the community level. This will allow the government to concentrate on maintaining strong economic growth and development as a means of accumulating political capital. The government as the man of the house will go on being the main breadwinner while the feminized people sector will become responsible for domestic care (Tan, 2001: 113-4).

This is perhaps most clearly indicated in the words of then-acting Minister of Education Shanmugaratnam (2003: 2; my emphasis) where he re-emphasized the notion of the 'Singapore soul':

> A deep and pervasive sense of **care** and **compassion** is fundamental to Singapore's next stage of development of a society. Singapore is not, and cannot, be only about information networks and economic efficiency, or about meritocracy and individual advancement. If that is all we are about, Singapore will **lack the soul** that makes great cities stand out. It will lose its place as a home for citizens—a home for the heart. It will also lose its special place as a home for people from the world around it.

Care and compassion are deemed to be vital of Singapore not just as home but as an economically vibrant global city as well. Without it Singapore is not able to progress onto the next stage of development. To this extent, 'care' has been valorized as an essential element of a 'Singapore soul', to be emplaced within the body polity of a maturing nation state.

Uncovering the politics imbued in the notion of a 'caring nation' will enable a deeper dwelling into the extension of care beyond the national boundaries of Singapore (as in the case of the IOT). Singaporeans have always been cajoled through moral exhortations by the state to care for those in need, irregardless of nationality. However, there appears to be some sort of moral hierarchy that seeks to assign place-based order and preference to carry out care-work. This is most succinctly expressed in then-Prime Minster Goh's Chok Tong's (2001: 3; my emphasis) National Day Rally speech:

> Philanthropy and volunteerism: Individuals must form lasting ties with their **larger community**. To feel passionately about Singapore is to care about more than just those things that directly affect our family, our

> friends and ourselves….we need to show compassion to those who are weaker than ourselves, especially those in our **neighbouring countries**.

From the preceding quote, we can see echoes of earlier discussion regarding Singapore's deliberate attempts to draw correlations between care, active citizenship and national identity. However the interesting revelation here perhaps lies in the fluidity and constructedness of the term "community". Previously, community as employed in state discourses has been used to refer to fellow Singaporeans. In this case, community is purposefully utilized to incorporate neighbouring countries in a bid to re-demarcate Singaporeans' scope of care. This can hardly be considered as a novelty as the Singapore government has constantly reiterated the importance of maintaining good neighbourly relations. Similarly, the over-riding political concern here appears to be stemming from economic considerations as the state has maintained the stance that Singapore, being a small country, relies extensively on the external (global) economy and it is only in the face of *regional stability* that Singapore can continue to prosper (Kong, 2001).

Given such a context, it comes as little surprise that the state was actively involved in appealing for care and generous practices for tsunami 'victims' by Singaporeans. Indeed, many of such appeals mobilized terms such as "community" and "neighbours" which seek to evoke moral attachments to tsunami affected peoples and places. As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (quoted in ST, 5 January 2005; my emphasis) illustrates,

> It's our responsibility to help our **neighbours**. We are an island but in fact we depend on the world. If we don't help put when other people have problems, we cannot expect other people to help us when we have problems.

The consistency in state's rhetoric about issues regarding foreign policy and relations can be deciphered by the quote above. We are once again reminded of Singapore's precarious situation as a small nation state and the importance of neighbourly relations. Helping neighbouring countries who have bore the sharp brunt of the IOT becomes an exercise of diplomacy, with reciprocity forming the underlying moral imperative. As Carter (forthcoming; original emphasis) argues, moral attachments to certain places/peoples are not just a matter of social and cultural construction, but a matter of *constant* social and cultural construction. Through such iterative discursive technique, the moral proximity between Singaporeans and tsunami-affected peoples/places are (re)created. As such, the appeals of generosity can be seen as a modality of power. As mentioned in Chapter 2, generosity is a virtue that cannot be universalized because of its emplacement within concrete encounters with others, however mediated these may be. Any acts of generosity must exclude generosity to others. The power of such state discourses exposes Singaporeans to the needs of neighbouring countries which are constructed to be of utmost importance and should thus be given priority over others.

However, there appears to be a seemingly countervailing discourse offered by the state in its response to the IOT. No longer is moral proximity evoked to elicit generous practices by Singaporeans; rather there is a deliberate dualistic construction of "us" (Singaporeans) and "them" (tsunami affected countries and peoples) in order to achieve the same outcome. As President Nathan (quoted in Channelnewsasia 28 June, 2005; my emphasis) exemplifies in his call for Singaporeans to volunteer or donate money to help tsunami 'victims': "We are city dwellers living in comfort and it is very easy to forget that **other people** affected by disasters are sometimes in a hopeless state." Rather than

seeing them as contradictory and tensional, I contend that the dialectical interplay of discourses associated with moral proximity and economic and circumstantial differences work hand-in-hand to try to motivate positive responses from Singaporeans. It is also important to note that the state does not solely engage in discursive appeals for generous behaviour from Singaporeans. Rather the notion of the 'caring nation' is materialized through state's decision not only to engage in monetary donations, but also in sending troops overseas as part of the country's relief efforts. This will be further discussed in chapter 6.

4.5 NGOs and their appeals for generous practices

After discussing the appeals for care and generous practices at the national level, this section will dwell on similar practices by various organizational infrastructures in Singapore. NGOs in particular will be the focal point here as they have been very active in attempting to rally support towards this cause. I argue that it is important to scrutinize the overarching messages of NGOs' ethos as they are significant waymarkers for the formulation of such discursive appeals. Adapting Cole's (1997) work on ethical prompting of charity to the Singapore's context, I classify NGOs into faith-based ones and those premising on ideologies related to secular humanism. It must be emphasized that these are not tightly bounded categories, with substantial overlaps and hence impossible to disentangle.

4.5.1 NGOs and the discourse of religious caritas

In his exploration of the possibilities for ethics and politics of what he calls 'receptive generosity', Coles (1997) argues that there have been two principle pathways to the ethical prompting of charity. The first stems from movements rooted in various forms of religion which have acted out of love (*agape*) and charity (*caritas*) as forms of God-ordained principles and God-given gifts which provide an ethical framework for living in the world of the self and the world of the other. Indeed a discourse analysis of the organization mission statements of faith-based NGOs actively involved in post-tsunami work demonstrates a clear declaration of religious ethos. For many of them, a general statement of religious ethos is deemed sufficient to convey the context of their work:

> YMCA of Singapore is a Christian organization, affiliated worldwide
> (YMCA)

> Buddhist Research Society has Buddhism as its foundation and will reflect this in all its activities and areas of work
> (Buddhist Research Society)

Yet it is clear that from this array of mission statements that religious foundations, principles and expression can take up many forms, and can be characterized by different discursive traits. Thus emphasis is given to particular facets of religious ethos which range from the motivation and equipping of the giving/serving organization, right through to the encouragement of new lifestyles among people. More frequently a religious ethos involved being motivated by various God-given concerns:

> ….motivated by the love of God…
> (Salvation Army)

> Our work is inspired by the great compassion and love of Buddha for Mankind [sic]…
>
> (Buddhist Research Society)

It is perhaps unsurprising that the ethos of religious agape and caritas expressed in these mission statements should emphasize that the wholeness of the individual will involve dealing with spiritual needs:

> …to develop Body, Mind and Spirit, which are based on Christian principles.
>
> (YMCA Singapore)

> …Jesus showed his love through holistic care (physical, social, emotional and spiritual) and we must do the same to others
>
> (Methodist Church)

More often than not, these organizations have little reservations in utilizing discourses that reflect their aim to preach and share their faith with other people:

> At its centre are Christians who, regarding Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, desire to share their faith with others and make him known, believed, trusted, loved, served and exemplified in all human relationships.
>
> (YMCA)

> [The Salvation Army's] mission is to preach Gospel of Jesus Christ and meet human needs in His name and without discrimination
>
> (Salvation Army)

It is however interesting to note that while many of these organizations exhort the importance of addressing spiritual needs in their ethos, almost all go to great lengths in expressing their refusal to engage in what Cloke *et al* (2005) terms as social oppression where the establishments force their religious worldviews onto people. Hence there is a

near universal discursive practice by the organizations to proclaim the rendering of care, love and help to people of "*different race, language and religion"*. It is not sheer coincidence for the repeated citation of this phrase; rather it exemplifies how state ideologies are interwoven with religious discourses. In Singapore, the state has always insisted on secularism and maintained that all welfare related NGOs (including VWOs) should provide service to all regardless of race or creed. This has led to a clear demarcation of religion and politics:

> Programmes and services should be provided to those in need and **without racial and religious bias**. Recognizing that Singapore is a secular society, the Board should ensure best efforts in avoiding **proselytization** in the course of its programmes and services to people unless the clients' prior consent is obtained.
>
> (NCSS, 2003, my emphasis)

As Clammer (1991: 40) has espoused, Singapore's adoption of secularism is buoyed by "two-fold fears of religion acting as a source of communal strife or as a rallying point for anti-government sentiment." Religious establishments operating in a secular state has to tread the fine line of being evangelical yet apolitical.

As stated earlier, religious ethos guide the formulation of NGOs' appeals for care and generous practices by Singaporeans. We can see various components of mission statements being translated into moral exhortations:

> God has given us a mission: to show His love to the helpless victims (of the IOT) and show them the way to wholeness spiritually, physically and socially. We want to reach all lost, damaged and hurting people for Christ.
>
> (Salvation Army)

> We have seen tons of images in the media of helpless people and destroyed homes. As Buddhist disciples, we have a moral duty to help and care for them spiritually and physically, regardless of who they are and whether they are followers of Buddhism. Those who can volunteer their time in helping the communities, that would be the best. If not monetary donations would also be good.
>
> (Ms Lim, administrative officer of Buddhist Research Society)

Once again we are reminded of the images in the media and there is a reproduction of the 'helplessness' of victims and the great scale of destruction. Arguably, such reminders acting alongside with appeals serve to harness encounters of Singaporeans with the needs of peoples affected by the tsunami. Religion then becomes the engine that seeks to drive Singaporeans' responsive and attentive relations to such needs. However the terms charity and caritas are themselves unpopular in these discourses with expression of agape or love being far more appealing. This distinction of appeal is not explained by the organizations concerned but on this evidence it would appear that as far as contemporary religions are concerned, generosity is constructed as far more love oriented than charitable, perhaps indicating some acquiescence to the secularization of charity and the recasting of generosity around the more exclusive religious prompting of agape/love. Furthermore, there is often a moral impulse to elevate spiritual needs alongside more commonly recognized needs such as physical and emotional needs. In one sense, Cloke *et al* (2005) argue that this represents a non-recognition of alterity—an attempt to impose religious worldviews onto people—although most of the organizations emphasize the non-discriminatory and individual sensitivity of their work in accordance to state principles. Interestingly, there is a hierarchy as to what constitutes good generous practices. Volunteerism seems to be the preferred over monetary donations as we can see from Miss Lim's statement. When prompted further on this, she argues that Buddhism

advocates *active involvement* in helping needy people, and how followers can make a physical difference to other people's lives. As such, volunteerism seems to align itself closer to the teachings of the religion. Similarly other faith-based NGOs also seem to favour volunteering over monetary donations. There are pictures on the websites and details on the websites of YMCA and Salvation Army prompting Singaporeans to engage in volunteering work in tsunami hit countries. Positive accounts from other volunteers are included to share their experiences so that potential volunteers are not fazed by volunteering. These accounts often exhort that extending volunteerism across national boundaries to other spatial contexts is indeed an act of higher spiritual order. Volunteering to places affected by the tsunami is thus romanticized as the preferred ethical action administered by pious disciples of the religion.

4.5.2 NGOs and the discourse of secular humanism

Coles's (1997) second pathway to the ethical prompting of charity arises from the replacement of God-centred philosophies with those which centre on human beings and their political and economic institutions. The excision of religious influence has not been as easy as it might seem as "secular efforts adopt many of the contours of the very religion that provokes the crisis to which they are a response" (Cole, 1997: 8), and we can assume that many NGOs and individuals prompted by humanist motives and ethos will be influenced by, and sympathetic to religious principles of giving, justice and mercy, even if reducing to accept the 'God-trick' which sources these principles. The core of a secular humanist approach is "reasoned altruism coupled with bureaucratic distance,

which together conjure up justice based understandings and philanthropy" (Cloke *et al*, 2005: 393).

It must be re-emphasized at the outset that it is often difficult to disentangle religious and secular ethos in the organizational statements surveyed. The overtly religious philosophies discussed above are clearly non-secular, but many of the stands of seemingly secular ethos in these statements apply to a range of organizations—religious, non-religious and partnership between the two. As such, I conclude that religious and secular ethos will often invite similar views about the rights of the individual and the provision of help to the needy. A corollary of these statements concerning human rights is that individuals should be treated non-judgmentally and accepted as themselves. Such acceptance is clearly signaled in the ethos of a wide range of organizations:

> The Singapore Red Cross is a part of world-wide, non-political, non-religious movement which based its work on the fundamental principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality..we are dedicated to protecting human life and dignity.
>
> (Singapore Red Cross)

> Mercy Relief strives to extend sensitive humanitarian services to all regardless of country, culture and creed.

From the above mission statements, there are echoes of earlier emphasis by faith-based NGOs on the extending care work to all regardless of social identities. These statements are formulated based on foundations of social justice and the respect of human life. Interestingly, organization ethos often transcends a focus on the 'rights' of the individual to one of providing the individual with life changing opportunities. Thus there is an

obvious ethos amongst NGOs to provide sanctuary, safety, security as well as care for vulnerable people.

> Mercy Relief aims to provide an opportunity of sanctuary and shelter within an ethos of friendship
>
> Singapore Red Cross's mission is to support the vulnerable and disadvantaged people and to be a force for positive change in their lives and communities.

The ethical context of this provision is variously coded in terms of friendship, companionship and community. Organizational ethos thereby attempts to frame an environment in which people in need can be made to feel warmth and supported. Discursive narratives here steer clear of the religious precept of 'loving', perhaps because of the concept of 'love' is countercultural to the reasoned nature of humanist outreach but equally they also exclude direct references to 'charity', a concept which has strong legal and financial implications (Cloke *et al*, 2005).

For non-religious NGOs, the appeals for care and generous practices from Singaporeans mirror the organizational ethos of secular humanism. Premised on grounds of shared humanity, notions of social justice and protection of precious human lives are evoked to draw relations between Singaporeans and tsunami affected peoples. The needs of tsunami 'victims' are highlighted in hope that Singaporeans will respond:

> Singaporeans are privileged in that they are not affected by the tsunami. However our neighbours are not so lucky. They are in serious need of help and Singaporeans should extend their helping hands. We need to provide the resources to help them get back to their normal lives.. As part of the human community, this is the least we can do…We are realistic. We know that not everyone can spare time for volunteering even though I think that

> it is a more responsible way to help. That's why we have the Tidal Wave Fund, to allow busy Singaporeans other avenues to help victims of the tsunami
>
> (Miss Teo, administrative officer of Singapore Red Cross)

> …as fellow human beings, Singaporeans need to help those people affected by the tsunami regain their normal lives.
>
> (Mercy Relief)

From these appeals, we can see the emphasis on the need to realizing the potential of the tsunami affected peoples for self sufficiency, with some sense that they need to be helped or empowered to solve their own problems, but a wider rationale of easing the 'victims' back into the system which have previously failed them. These approaches appear similar to those adopted avowedly religious NGOs, save for the absence of a spiritual dimension. In addition, Ms Teo's quote once again provided insights to the romanticized notion of volunteerism. Monetary donations should only be used at the last resort as volunteering is represented as being 'more responsible', 'more ethical'. It is clear then, that there is substantial overlap between humanistic and religious ethos, with different philosophical roots often producing similar values.

Faith-based and non-religious NGOs are also very similar in their constant (inter-textual) references to the images that were represented in the media. Mercy Relief perhaps provided one of the most poignant descriptions:

> Physical damage and emotional loss were immense, as many lost their homes and family members in a matter of minutes. Contagious waterborne diseases, such as cholera and dysentery also threatened to increase the death toll as the lack of clean drinking water, rotting corpses and the breaking down of health systems in the affected areas threatened an epidemic. With countless rendered homeless and hungry, there is an urgent need to for humanitarian aid to be extended to these stricken victims.

Body, diseases and decay implying helplessness re-surface once more to 'haunt' people's minds. As Moeller (1999) reminds us, images capture attention easily and they often evoke strong emotional responses. This is perhaps what NGOs are trying to achieve—gushes of emotional enthusiasm from Singaporeans to act, helping tsunami victims and countries restore to a state of normalcy.

4.6 Chapter Summary

It is important to know *where* the appeals for care and generous practices for tsunami affected countries and peoples come from since they might form important motivating impetus for Singaporeans to do something. As I have shown in this chapter, such appeals occur at multiple geographical scales. At the national scale, the state takes an active role in eliciting responses through repeated discourses of ethical citizenship. NGOs at the sub-national level play a distinctive part as well by aligning appeals for generous practices in accordance to their organizational ethos. These discourses constructed by the state and NGOs do not operate independently; rather they are layered with dominant representations of the IOT in the popular media in a hopeful bid to draw Singaporeans into responsive and attentive relations of encounter with the needs of tsunami affected peoples.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHY DONATE?

5.1 Preamble

Discursive constructions of the tsunami, as exemplified in the previous chapter, have been closely intertwined with appeals for generosity that are framed by and promoted through different organizational infrastructures and state mechanisms. These pathways and conduits seek to expose Singaporeans to the sufferings of tsunami 'victims', closing the distance between "us" and "them". According to Clark (forthcoming), this is a relation of proximity in which one is so close as to be moved or touched by the other, close enough to be drawn into extreme intimacy by the feeling of an obligation to do something for the one who appears in need. But it is at the same time a relationship characterized by unbridgeable and unfathomable distance given that the self knows that it has not lived through, cannot know what is it to live through the experience of the other to whom they have come to feel bound. As Bartnett (2005a) has stressed, proximity or distance in this context is not a simple, measurable degree of spatial contiguity but a more complex sense of difference that manifests itself through an unsurpassable rupture in the continuity of space and time. It is about formation of a bond, a relation that enfolds within itself the condition of strangeness, the non-relation of unshared and incommunicable experience even as it opens up the possibility of being together (Clark, forthcoming). Communication, caring, generosity—all the basic structures of social existence—are made possible by the opening of one to another.

By providing an analytical prism to illuminate the multiple and complex motivations of Singaporeans engaging in monetary donations to tsunami affected places and peoples, this chapter attempts to show the *effectiveness* of the appeals of generosity in drawing Singaporeans into responsive and attentive relations of encounter with the

needs of tsunami affected peoples. In addition, it shall be argued that other kinds of networks and events have the agency in the active creation of motivating forces for monetary donations that goes beyond these circulative appeals within Singapore. It is certainly not my intention to suggest that underlying motivations to donate are backed up by singular causal explanations. Rather, more often than not, a complex interplay of driving forces induces affective consequences which escalate the impetus for Singaporeans to donate.

5.2 The Power of Visual Imagery

This section will analyze the role of visual imagery in producing sympathetic subjectivities and the formation of generous subjects engaged in practices of donations. Drawing upon post-structural readings of materiality, I seek to address current critiques of representation to recast images as 'actants' (Latour, 1992; 1993) so as to illustrate their performativity (c.f Butler, 1990; 1993) in the active production of geographical subjectivities. The term 'actant' has a genealogy rooted in what is now popularly known as Actor-Network Theory (ANT). "[An actant] implies *no* special motivation of *human individual* actors or of humans in general. An actant can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of action" (Latour, 1996: 374, original emphasis). It is not as if ANT does not see a difference between humans and non-humans, subjects and objects. Rather the decoupling of human/agency, denoted by the (variable) use of the term 'actant' as distinct from the more conventional 'actor', signals a methodological commitment to treating any distributions of authority and intentionality amongst actants as practical achievements to be elucidated (Callon and Law, 1995).

Aligning with such an approach, I consider tsunami images in terms of the geographical enfolding of subject and object (c.f. Matless, 2000). The tsunami images here are undoubtedly objects but they are also geographical subjects in three senses: they are our subject for enquiry; they present geographical practices which go to make up senses of self; they are produced through and seek to produce geographical subjectivities. The concern here is then in effect for the nuanced understanding of the intertwining relationship of the object/subject; or in Latour's terms the "*collective* geography of objects/subjects, where the collective encompasses not only relations between people but also the association of humans and nonhumans" (Latour, 1993: 4; emphasis added). The geography of tsunami images, as will be shown in the following discussion, is never solely human.

One of the most commonly cited motivation for Singaporeans to donate involves the 'shock' effect that images of the tsunami conjure emotively within them. While many of such respondents expressed initial disbelief about the huge extent of destruction conveyed by preliminary reports, the subsequent proliferation of images confirmed the devastating situation and affective consequences of shock and sympathy came into play to influence decision to donate. As Su-anne puts it,

> "When the news about this tsunami first came, I thought the media was exaggerating things…I didn't think it was that serious. But as I saw the images in the newspapers in the following days, I was stunned. I suddenly realized oh god this is serious. I had to do something…that's why I donated."

The power of visual imagery over mere words can be deciphered from Su-anne's accounts. Moeller (1999) an experienced journalist on hazard reporting, has similarly

observed that images possess a greater propensity to evoke emotions and thus inducing actions and responses from people in times of disaster. This perhaps could not have come across more explicitly through Terry's rationalization of his act of monetary aid to tsunami 'victims':

> Those reports of death figures to me are just numbers…yes they are frightening but I cannot relate to them. But a picture speaks a thousand words. I was left overwhelmed by all those images of piled up bodies and collapsed buildings. In such a situation, how can anyone not be affected? I had to do something to help these helpless victims of the tsunami.

From Terry's strong response, it is not difficult to see the dominant imageries of the tsunami that were captured in the minds of audience. Hegemonic representations of the tsunami by the local media that are espoused in the previous chapter are constantly (re)produced by the respondents in their discursive justification for their generous practice of monetary donations. Indeed about 84.5% of Singaporeans surveyed expressed that the most impressionable image that permeated through the media has to be that of dead bodies. Furthermore, another substantive 76% of respondents commented that it was precisely due to their exposure to these pictures of 'dead bodies' that strengthened their resolution to donate money to help those affected by the horrific disaster. These overwhelming responses by Singaporeans did not occur by rare chance. Rather as Tan Yi Hui, an online content producer with *The Straits Times* (ST) puts it:

> People are just innately attracted by sex, violence and death. That is why we constantly have to come up with what we call human interest stories. It may sound rather crude but if you think about it, you want people to take note of the tsunami, what's best but to come up with some provocative headlines. If you want people to donate, throw in a few pictures of dead bodies or victims crying.

Indeed such is the power of images that most interviewees framed their responses couched in terms such as "helpless" and "in need of aid" and "pitiful", very much aligned with the constructions of the disaster-affected people by ST.

> When I flipped through the Straits Times everyday during the period of the tsunami, I saw tons of images of helpless people wailing in the streets, searching through the heaps of bodies for their loved ones …which human being will not be moved? Most people's natural instinct will be to donate money to help the victims. (Mr Lui)

> What were reported in the newspapers really made me want to donate. I really cried when I saw those dead bodies, some even rotting. These victims are really in need of aid. I think it is in people's nature to help fellow human beings. (Sharon)

What is interesting from the above quotes is how visual imageries have the effect of striking a chord with people's *innate* emotional ability to sympathize and help fellow human beings in distress. Monetary donations are thus endorsed as *natural* acts to be practised indiscriminately by all since compassion is deemed to be an ontological quality of being human. On first sight such views seem to coincide with the concept of ethics of justice presented in chapter 2 which argues that social justice and human commonality provide good moral exhortations for people to provide aid to needy (distant) others. However it can be seen that Singaporeans like Su-anne, Terry and Sharon are motivated to donate not in monological reflection of one's own obligations as a human being; rather, the dramatic images that draws them into (mediated) encounters with and responses to the needs of pitiful tsunami 'victims' provide the source for their practical action.

Without over-romanticizing the role of visual imageries in the active creation of sympathetic subjectivities and impetus to donate, there are many respondents who were

extremely critical of the media's excessive bombardment of images of the tsunami, especially those which focus on death and portray elements of cataclysmic destruction. However the underlying catalysts provoking the same critical stance differed vastly between individuals or in some cases, were even contradictory in nature. Sharon for example, has strong opinions about the constant circulation and (re)production of the same dramatic images in the media as they have the ability to make her go through an emotional upheaval each time she sees them. As she puts it in emphatic fashion:

> Enough is enough...how many dead bodies do you want me to see? I stopped reading the newspapers after a while [in the aftermath of the tsunami] because everytime I came across, you know, a not-so-nice picture, I still got very upset and cried.

Sharon's critique of the media stems from her own emotional inability to cope with the interpreted meaning(s) conveyed by repeated images. On the other hand, Eng Guan, a postgraduate researcher, displayed outright contempt for the media due to his perceived notion of media's opportunistic endeavour in trying to use dramatized imageries with the sole intention of capturing readership:

> I understand that some images are needed to evoke responses from people. I myself have donated upon seeing pictures of tsunami victims. But for god's sake, I think this is a classic case of what we call 'overkill'. There is almost a perverse fetish for dead bodies. And for what? Just for the media to expand their readership.

Eng Guan's harsh appraisal of the politics involved in media's (re)presentation of the tsunami for audience consumption finds strong resonance in Moeller's (1999) critique of media's preoccupation with disaster reporting or what she terms as 'compassion fatigue'.

In comparison, another respondent seemed less reluctant to dwell on the politics of media's selective coverage of the tsunami. Rather he professed uneasiness that the over-exposure of certain images of the tsunami may have adverse repercussions in eliciting generous practices such as monetary donations:

> I agree that those death and destructive [sic] images are useful in trying to get people to donate. But when there is an oversupply of such images, I think we [Singaporeans] get numbed. If they [the media] can show photos on how donations are helping victims' improve their lives, such as a happy kid receiving food or something like that, I think more people will donate. There is no need to keep emphasizing on the tragic side. (Mr Lim)

What is interesting from the above account is how Mr Lim tries to construct alternative discourses as to what *genre/type* of images has the agency to motivate generous responses from Singaporeans. As the earlier quote of Mr Tan Yi Hui exemplifies, ST invokes images of the catastrophic and elegiac dimensions of the tsunami to get Singaporeans to donate. However Mr Lim suggests otherwise by championing that images that connote positive rehabilitation and recovery of tsunami affected peoples/places can bring about similar if not greater effects. From the preceding three responses, while all of them are in some ways critical about media's over-emphasis on tragic images, there is no denial that the media enables Singaporeans to be drawn into receptive encounters with peoples affected by the tsunami. The endless circulation and reproduction or (to put it in a Butlerian way) performativity of visual imageries have the effects of allowing sympathetic subjectivities and generous subjects to be brought into 'being'.

5.3 Moral landscapes, Practices of the Self and the Realization of Subjects

The section will evaluate the impacts of appeals made by various organizational infrastructures discussed previously, specifically whether they materialize into positive outcomes in terms of Singaporeans' participation in monetary donations. I argue that many of the respondents surveyed/interviewed articulated their motivations to donate very much in line with the moral suasions that underpin these appeals. It must however be emphasized that there are varying degrees of allegiance to such discursive statements of appeals and such appeals are often (re)interpreted by individuals in the rationalization of their generous practice.

Matless's (1994; 1995) notions of moral landscapes and practices of the self will serve as important and relevant analytical tools here. Matless has been one of the pioneering geographers in trying to expound the productive intersections between moral philosophies/theories and geography. He is extremely intrigued by the production of what he calls 'moral landscapes' and how conduct by certain people in particular landscapes may be judged as (in)appropriate. For instance in his study of twentieth century English landscapes, Matless (1995: 96) purports that a "moral vocabulary" is embedded in the landscape, through which citizens are "educationally and punitively taught better." Engaging in outdoor activities becomes discursively constructed as the 'art of right living' through which an individual and nation might give form to itself. Hence the ways in which individuals realize themselves as 'ethical subjects' in relation to the elements of such moral codes are known as 'practices of the self' (Matless, 1994). This concept is derived from Foucault's (1979) notion of 'aesthetics of existence' and is fundamentally interested in the avenues through which subjects become "instructed in and learn to

instruct themselves" (Sharp *et al*, 2000: 17). In what follows, these concepts will be applied to elucidate their practical relevance in a more nuanced analysis of Singaporeans' motivations to donate.

5.3.1 Donations and Responsible Citizens

As suggested previously, the state actively utilized discourses of a 'caring nation' and 'responsible citizenship' to encourage Singaporeans to help tsunami-affected countries. Echoing Matless, I argue that moral codes are embedded in the national landscape of Singapore where generous practices are deemed as the 'art of right living' and hence demanded of ethical and responsible citizens. It is evident from the survey results that many Singaporeans subscribed to such moral codes—an overwhelming majority (82%) of those surveyed highlighted that their rationale for monetary donations arose out of a sense/duty required of a responsible citizen. In addition, another 56% agreed that the act of donating is exemplary of Singapore being a 'caring nation'. Perhaps such congruence with state discourses could never be more clearly illustrated through the words of the following interviewees:

> The government told us to donate money to help those countries affected by the tsunami. As good citizens we should do what we can. I am not blindly following the government. I think they [government] make good sense so I wanted to do my part. I felt really good after donating, like I have been a responsible individual (laughs). (Mr Lui)

> I donated as I think the government is right in telling us to do something as responsible citizens for the tsunami victims. I don't see it [donating money] as a must-do thing but I feel it's something I really wanted to do... Seeing Singaporeans' generous donations, I truly believe we are a caring nation. (Jac)

It can be observed that through the individual *practice* of donation, both Mr Lui and Jac realize themselves as responsible subjects in relation to coding of Singapore as a moral landscape inhabited by responsible and caring citizens. Furthermore, Singapore as a 'caring nation' is not an ontological, pre-given reality; rather it is discursively produced and given material form through Singaporeans' ongoing practices of generosity. In this case, it can be deciphered that Singaporeans' actions are not motivated in monological reflection of one's own obligations; the agency of the state in bringing Singaporeans into encounters with and responses to tsunami affected peoples who desire care and help cannot be discounted. What is also fascinating is that though there is a reproduction of state's rhetoric on generous practices as civic *duty*, a somewhat contradictory stance can be deciphered from many interviewees' conscious attempts to distinguish between donating because they *wanted to* rather than they felt *obliged to*. The latter sense of obligation tended to be linked with discourses about 'do-gooders'—a term which many respondent used to convey a segment of Singaporeans whose sense of duty left them ill-equipped with for any lasting commitment to helping people in need. Hence there is a firm resolve to differentiate between levels of dutifulness and heart-felt motivation in the way in which individuals use their acts of donating to create a more virtuous identity (Cloke *et al*, forthcoming).

If there is any truth to the 'death of distance' and 'end of geography' discourse (Ohmae, 1995), it certainly wouldn't have gained any validity from many Singaporeans' reasons for donating to the 'victims' affected by IOT. Indeed the survey conducted caricatured the geographical boundaries of the 'care-scape' (Gleeson and Kearns, 2001) of respondents, where 92% of them professed that Singapore's proximity to the places

affected by the IOT was the main motivation for them to donate. The importance of geographical distance can similarly be teased out from the in depth interviews carried out with donors:

> The tsunami happened just next to us. We [Singaporeans] were lucky that it didn't happen to us. Our neighbours were not so lucky. When they are in trouble, the least we can do is to donate money to help them. It is only by doing such thing that we can maintain good neighbourly relations, and say we are good neighbours. (Sharon)

> In Chinese, we have sayings like □□□□□□ [It is better to rely on your neighbours than relatives who are geographically far from you] □□□□□□□□ [We cannot depend on water that is located far away to put out a fire]. This shows the importance of neighbours. If we don't help our neighbours in times of need, who will help us when we are in trouble?(Jac)

State's appeals for generous practices through discourses of good neighbourly relations appear to have been internalized by many Singaporeans such that they can articulate it as though it is part of their natural disposition. Geographical proximity equating to moral proximity seems to be the undertone in many of these exhortations to donate. In such a situation, generosity is a virtue that cannot be universalized since there is a deliberate intent by the state to emplace Singaporeans within concrete encounters with *neigbouring* countries affected by the IOT. As discussed in Chapter 2, any act of generosity must also exclude generosity to others. Generosity here can be seen as a modality of power since many Singaporeans identify with state's discourses that neighbouring countries should be given priority in tsunami relief over others. Furthermore, many Singaporeans also concur with the state's justification for helping neighbouring countries—the expectation of reciprocal action in event of a similar predicament. As such, through donations,

Singaporeans are able to assume simultaneous (and intertwining) subject positions of a responsible citizen and a good neighbour.

Before suggesting that there is a wholesale embrace of state discourses with little agency on the part of Singaporeans, there are respondents who re-interpret or even actively refigure such discourses to a narrative that can be accepted by their own moral standards and hence warranting their generous practice. Many of such Singaporeans are uneasy over state's emphasis on symmetrical reciprocity from neighbouring countries as the basis for helping them. For instance Joe agrees that giving aid to neighbouring countries in distress is a virtue but he adamantly insists that it should be done out of goodwill and not for something in return:

> Yes, I did donate for the sake of helping our neighbours. But I do not think that the government is right in asking us to help so that we can count on them [neighbouring countries] if ever it's our turn to run into trouble. It's not sincere at all and morally wrong.

For Joe, the most important aspect of donation is that it should not be based on self interested motives. Thus while he acknowledges his monetary donations were triggered by appeals to help neighbouring countries, he disassociates himself from the state's concern of reciprocity by constructing his actions as fundamentally morally oriented. Su-anne's position with regards to this issue parallels that of Joe's. Equally, critical of notions of reciprocity prevalent in state's rhetoric, Su-anne articulates her motivations to donate in terms of not what she can get out of it, but what the recipients can benefit from the aid given their economically marginal position:

> I don't care whether we will benefit in future by helping them [the neighbouring countries]. To me, I want to help those affected places because we are all Asians. And these countries are less developed compared to Singapore…I think the government wants to ask for donations from us [Singaporeans] in this way too, by saying that we are more developed so that we should help. But cannot, right? [sic]…you can't imply other countries are poor and backward. That's so insulting.

Though Su-anne professes nonchalance at state's underlying political rationale for helping neighbouring countries affected by the IOT, she tries to align her motivation to donate in congruence to the state's (hidden) rhetoric. She rationalizes that highlighting the economic backwardness of neighbouring countries is a political taboo but it is precisely premised on this fact that both the state and her have the impetus to do something for them. It is also interesting to note how Su-anne mobilized the political-cultural 'Asian' identity. Hence, being geographically proximate allows for the opportunity of possessing a singular identity of being Asian, all the more why Singaporeans should help those tsunami affected countries.

The mention of the 'Asian' identity was not a one-off event. Indeed it was also evoked in strikingly similar fashion by Lynn albeit articulated in such a way that demands critical re-thinking notions of geographical proximity and distance:

> I am willing to help because those affected places like China, India, and Indonesia are all so close to us and hence we share an Asian identity. If you ask me to donate to a faraway 'ang-moh' [local dialect to denote Caucasian] country like Australia, USA or UK, I may not do so…I must also admit that the media played a big part. I think because it happened in the Asian region, the local newspapers kept on reporting and reporting. That's why I came to know about this tragic incident and that's why I donated.

Lynn, as with Su-anne, expresses strong inclination to donate to neighbouring countries as there is a presence of a common identity. It can be seen that a moral hierarchy is being constructed, with distance being the crucial variable in the impetus to donate. However from Lynn's account, distance does not necessarily refer to physical Euclidean distance. Even though China and India is as far (if not further) away as Australia is from Singapore, Lynn's geographical imagination of Australia informs her otherwise. Furthermore, the cultural proximity of India and China to Singapore (all Asian countries as espoused by Lynn) also plays a large role in the perceptive formation of distance, with Australia (re)imagined as being 'further' away. Lynn's quote also interestingly suggests that geographical proximity to tsunami affected areas does not have a *direct* impact on her motivation to donate. Rather an indirect influence is plausible as the proximity to such places induces media's interest to engage in widespread reports on the tsunami hence allowing readers to know and respond to the disaster.

5.3.2 Organizational appeals and their impacts on monetary donations

After casting insights into state's appeals for generous practices and how these have been consumed by Singaporeans, this section will subject various NGO's similar appeals to critical scrutiny, explicating their effectiveness in eliciting positive responses from Singaporeans. In Chapter 4, I have examined the ways in which overarching ethos represent a significant waymarker in the moral landscape of caring for tsunami affected peoples and places. Deploying Roland Coles' (1997) ideal types of ethos in charitable organizations, I suggested that many of the organizations involved in tsunami related work were not only undergirded by strong and deliberate discourses of 'mission' or

'values' but that these discourses presented important ethical bases for involvement and action. However, it is imperative for us to understand the role of individual agency in the translation of such rhetoric into physical actions (Tolbert and Zuker, 1996; Hirsch and Loundsbury, 1997). As Jenkins (1996: 128) puts it, "institutions are emergent products of what people do as much as they are constitutive of what people do." As such, I argue, following McDonald and Warburton (2003) that Singaporeans contribute to the discursive construction and perhaps deconstruction of institutional order through their practice of monetary donation.

A faith commitment to help people in trouble was a common vector of motivation which prompted Singaporeans engagement in donations for tsunami affected places and 'victims'. I do not suggest here that more secular motivation is unimportant. Several of my interviewees expressed their motivation to donate in terms of "responsibility to help fellow human beings in distress" and of a "need to help in the name of social justice." Predominantly however, monetary donation was viewed in the context of a religious response to the needs of others. 47% of survey participants professed religious underpinnings for their generous act while another 41% admittedly were 'seduced' by appeals from faith-based organizations, resulting in their donations. To put it more explicitly through some of my interviewees' experiences:

> I have been a Christian now for two years, my main perception of life has changed….I just want to be involved in helping people. My church has been collecting funds for the tsunami victims and I thought this was a good way to show my faith and be closer to God. (Jonathan)

> To be a Buddhist disciple, you have to do good deeds to accumulate merits. So when my Buddhist association started to ask for donations, as a follower of Buddhism, giving what I can is the right thing. (Mdm Goh, translated from Mandarin)

It is not difficult to see from the above statements that religious organizations are fertile grounds in the appeals and collection of donations. They are in Matless' (1994) words, moral landscapes coded with normative meanings that seek to (re)produce subjects engaged in ethical practices. Hence through such 'practices of the self' (in this case donations to tsunami 'victims'), Mdm Goh and Jonathan actively realize themselves as religious individuals and arguably enhance their intimate bonds to God/Buddha.

Without homogenizing donors whose motivation arose out of religious concerns, there were in fact, distinct differences in the degree to which such a generous practice involved overt evangelism rather than quiet contributions that made little or no demands of the tsunami 'victims'. Jonathan for instance, perceives himself as a "warrior of God" with evangelical tendencies. He strongly believes that the money that he donates via his church will not only "alleviate the physical suffering" of the victims but also bring them "spiritually closer to God". Jonathan's penultimate goal as a Christian is to help as many people as possible to "attain salvation" by introducing them to the religion. Conversely, Peck Choo who is the same church as Jonathan has different interpretations of the religion and the uses of her donation:

> For me, I don't believe in forcing religion down other people's throat. If they want to be a Christian, I believe God will show them the way….it's not up to me. My donations are purely done out of my Christian faith, a belief to help people in distress.

Peck Choo's caricature of a good Christian is centred on individual fulfillment as a dutiful disciple rather than having to spread gospels (even to unwilling parties) through rendering help to needy others. Her interpretation of Christianity is vastly different from

that of Jonathan's whose focus is on spreading the faith. Indeed Peck Choo is not the sole upholder of such a view. Pei Chin (aged 42) shares with Peck Choo the same disdain in using donation as a means of advancing evangelistic agenda, although she comes across as arguably more provocative, delineating the normative boundary of religion and eager to defend her own faith as more "understanding":

> Buddhism teaches us to do good, to help others….When I heard the Buddhist Research Society asking for donations to help the tsunami victims, I immediately gave what I could afford...Buddhism is a very 'gentle' religion. We don't have ulterior motives. We don't force people to believe in Buddha before we help them.

From the interview excerpts above, it is not simply the case of donating out of religious concerns. Dwelling deeper into this issue allows the unearthing of meanings behind the practice of monetary donation, especially how it can become a vehicle of expression for individual faith or act as a bridge for recipients to engage with the religion spiritually. Furthermore there is a geography to monetary donations as well. While Pei Chin and Peck Choo do not distinguish between which organizations they donate to, Jonathan insists on donating to NGOs that are religious in nature as he believes it is through such avenues that his donations can fulfill its evangelistic role. Hence, it can be seen that individuals have agency in (re)interpreting the fundamental principles of their religion and negotiate the meanings behind the act of donating.

When asked about many religious organizations preferring volunteering practices over monetary donations, a majority of respondents agree with such a view (68%). However about 95% of survey respondents cited time constraints as the main factor influencing their decision to go ahead with monetary donations instead of volunteering.

Many interviewees further illustrated this point by arguing that their actions are also good deeds that would be recognized by God:

> I know volunteering is better but I have no time to go overseas to build houses. I think God will forgive me because donating money is also a way of helping them [tsunami victims]. And by the way, I don't know how to build houses and I think I will be more of a hindrance than help (laughs). (Jonathan)

> God won't blame me because donating money is also a good deed, though not as good as volunteering and I really don't have the time. But come to think of it, how many volunteers do you need? It can't be that all 4 million Singaporeans volunteer right? You need people to donate money so that the volunteers have something to bring overseas. (Mr Lui)

> To do volunteer work is good, I agree. But some of these volunteers are not there to really help. They merely want to travel. So no sincerity is involved, I rather they donate money. (Joyce)

We can see that there is a reproduction of NGO's discourses of volunteering being morally superior to monetary donations. Besides emphasizing on not having time to volunteer, many interviewees also present a plethora of reasons to rationalize why they volunteering may not be that desirable or practical after all. These reasons contribute to their ongoing moral persuasion to self and others about why they rather donate than to volunteer.

5.4 Kinship and place-based identification

Thus far, I have been documenting the appeals for monetary donations within Singapore and how locals have consumed, interpreted and responded to such discourses. However, one important dimension that has been relatively unexplored is the presence of *extra-local* appeals—those that go beyond the national boundaries—and how these impact upon Singaporeans. According to Bunnell and Nah (2005: 250), tsunami research

should also focus on the "affective consequences [that] extend extra-locally through familial, ethnic and media networks, many of which has also been mobilized in efforts to provide assistance from afar." Such a formulation debunks many of the assumptions and arguments presented in the geographies of responsibility literature highlighted in chapter 2 that motivation for practical action depends solely on individual obligation. It directs attention to the *agency* of various types of networks in translating the needs of tsunami affected peoples to Singaporeans. Indeed the presence of kin in tsunami affected countries became a big motivating force for some of my interviewees. While there have been direct appeals from family and relatives to help them cope with the disaster, most volunteered to help since their loved ones are living in these affected countries:

> My uncle and his kids in Indonesia wrote to me asking me for monetary aid. I have always been close to them so I agreed. But I also donated to these affected countries because probably because my relatives are there. If Indonesia's situation gets better, my uncle and his kids will be better off. (Casper)

> I have relatives living in Thailand, China and Indonesia. Besides helping them on a personal basis, I also donated because I wanted to see their countries recover so that they can get back to their normal lives again. (Beng Kiat)

There seems to be a firm belief that the overall recovery of the country determines how well its citizens can return to a state of normalcy. While the eagerness to witness improved lives of their kin remains a deciding factor in monetary donations, personal identification to the place affected by tsunami can also play a part in motivating generous practices

> I have always visited Krabi since I was a kid since my aunt lives there. I can still remember the beach and the small huts there…very beautiful. But my aunt told me that all these are gone because of the tsunami, I feel so sad. I always feel that Krabi is my second home. I have to donate to see my home in its beautiful state again. (Kee Boon)
>
> I used to live with my grandma in Tamil Nadu when I was young. I have such fond memories of the place. But now its all gone. All I can do is to donate some money to show my love for that place. (Geetha)

The presence of relatives in tsunami affected areas meant that many interviewees have spent a fair proportion of time in these places. Many of them have intimate connections with the place as can be seen from the evocation of place-based memories in their interviews. Their relational encounters with the trees, huts, beaches, relatives and so on, in particular places are deeply entrenched in their memories, often producing an emotional impetus for practices of donations to be performed.

5.5 Agency of 'events'

I have alluded to the power of visual imagery in eliciting monetary donations from Singaporeans at the beginning of the chapter and in the process highlighted the agency of objects (admittedly having a strong ANT influence). I want to extend this argument further by looking at the agency of events instead and its *modus operandi* in influencing Singaporeans to donate. It was perhaps strange that the name National Kidney Foundation (NKF) popped up in my interviews several times. Apart from being a charitable organization that also constantly appealed for donations from Singaporeans, there are no parallels to be drawn between NKF and the tsunami. However an event concerning the NKF occurred at that particular time and space—in Singapore and during the time of my interview. The NKF saga involved corruption charges to its chairman and

brought about huge questions surrounding how donations from the public are being (mis)used. With this shocking incident dominating the local news, it is perhaps understandable why many of my respondents mentioned this event:

> I have absolutely no faith in local charities anymore. Who knows what they do with my money? I rather donate to the tsunami. At least I know my money can help save thousands of lives and not end up in the pocket of some chairman. (Terry)
>
> The NKF saga has basically killed Singaporeans' trust in local charities. Seriously, at this point in time, I will only donate to help the tsunami victims. Seeing how rich the local charities are, I think these victims need my help more. (Richard)

As Derrida (1979) argues, any act of generosity must also exclude generosity to others. To put it simply, a gift when presented to an individual can no longer be given to a second person. This highlights the whole issue surrounding the politics of the gift/generosity: who should be the preferred recipient the gift/act of generosity? Why are certain claims for generosity more effective than others? The NKF event had the agency to invoke distrust of Singaporeans in local charities hence accentuating the moral status of help for tsunami 'victims' in the hierarchy of consideration for donations.

5.6 Chapter summary

Motivations of Singaporeans to donate to tsunami affected places and peoples are by far, plentiful and diverse. This chapter does not aim to offer a comprehensive listing of all these motivations. Neither does it try to chart out every single motivation for critical scrutiny on its own; rather, a modest attempt is made to elucidate the linkages between these disparate motivations. I have looked at the ways in which dispositions of

Singaporeans to respond to and to be receptive to others are worked up and how opportunities for action on these dispositions are organized. The agency of objects, events and discursive appeals from various organizational infrastructures mingle in myriad configurations enable Singaporeans to encounter the needs of tsunami affected peoples, thus inducing their generous donations. It is no longer sufficient to classify motivations in terms of high moralistic (but yet overly simplified) principles of altruism and self interest that focus on the obligations of individuals. Generous practices such as monetary donations are mundane, ordinary and everyday, and always undertaken in the company of others.

CHAPTER SIX

WHY VOLUNTEER?

6.1 Preamble

Singaporeans' expression of goodwill to tsunami affected peoples and places is certainly not monolithically restricted to monetary donations. Practices of generosity can exist in many forms and volunteerism seems to emerge as another common endeavour of Singaporeans to materialize their immense desire to help people in need. Although given that generous practices are often not mutually exclusive, volunteerism performed by Singaporeans in tsunami affected places warrants a separate enquiry due its distinct geographies—whether this refer to the sites of giving, the spatialities of generosity or the human or natural objects of generous conduct—that intersect with multiple and complex motivations behind such acts. As suggested in the previous chapter, the appeals for generosity set up Singaporeans to encounter and recognize the needs of tsunami affected peoples. While these encounters may be mediated and do not hinge on spatial contiguity, some Singaporeans however desire geographically proximate interactions with peoples affected by the IOT. Volunteerism thus materializes such a desire.

In this chapter, I seek to show how the diverse motivations of Singaporeans to engage in volunteerism are premised upon a dominant idealized imagining of the moral superiority of this practice over monetary donations. Indeed, volunteerism is more often than not articulated by respondents as being more responsible since they can physically witness the translation of their actions into real material impacts. This is particularly so for volunteerism that is conducted across national boundaries in foreign spatial contexts. While most respondents professed the cultural difficulties associated in working in foreign places (eg. different language, different lifestyles), they however view such extension of help to distant strangers as being more ethical as compared to volunteerism

at home. As compared to monetary donations where the tracing of their movements and uses is usually a matter of sheer impossibility, participants emphasize the need to engage in embodied practices. I argue that the positive perceptions of volunteer work and its associated embodied experiences are often important vectors of motivation for Singaporeans to engage in such practices. Through performances and encounters *in place*, such perceptions may be reinforced or refuted, which is then integral to the ongoing dynamics of self transformation or actualization. In what follows, the concept of embodiment (Crouch, 2001; 2002; 2003) will be espoused, despite its widely alleged methodological and representational impasse, so as to enable a critical assessment of the entangled webs of relations between motivations to volunteer and the experiences of *doing* volunteerism.

6.2 Embodying the volunteering experience

The concept of embodiment has been most richly explored in the field of tourism studies with key scholars such as Crouch (2001; 2002; 2007), Desforges (2000) and Edensor (2000) attempting to understand the bodily processes through which a tourist encounters the world in its complexity. Embodiment draws its epistemological strength from what is now commonly known as 'non representational theory' or the 'theory of practices' (Thrift, 1996; 1997; 1999). Non representational theory according to Thrift is about "practices, mundane everyday practices that shape the conduct of human beings towards others and themselves in particular sites." Developing non-representational theory, he insists is not a "project concerned with representation and meaning, but with the performative 'presentations, 'showings', 'manifestations' of everyday life" (Thrift,

1997: 126-7). Or more specifically, it centres on the body-subject, not the body, engaged in bodily practices of becoming. As Nash (2000) puts it, the emphasis is on practices that cannot adequately be spoken of, that words cannot capture, that texts cannot convey—on forms of experience and movement that are not only or never cognitive. Instead of theoretically representing the word, non-representational theory is concerned with the ways in which subjects know the "world without knowing it, the inarticulate understanding or practical intelligibility of an unformulated practical grasp of the world" (Taylor, quoted in Thrift, 1996: 10).

In close alignment with such theoretical bloodlines, the concept of embodiment is thus concerned with multidimensional sensuous encounters with the world and how emotions and relationships can be expressed through inter-subjective body communication (Meleau Ponty, 1962; Crossley, 1996; Coleman and Crang, 2002). The individual moves, speaks and experiences space through and in relation to the body and its body-space, and the immediate metaphorical and material space of doing things. The feeling of being together can animate space. The body is "rendered involved in the world in which it extends itself metaphorically, transforming the space, *flirting with space*" (Crouch, 2001: 62, original emphasis). This 'feeling of being' can be practiced as 'feeling of doing', a means of grasping the world and making sense of what it feels like, the feel at once and mutually physical and in a process of making sense (Harre, 1993). However, as Nash (2000) rightly cautions, such abstract accounts of body practices and the return to phenomenological notions of being-in-the-world warrants a retreat from critical analyses of the politics of the body in favour of the individualistic and universalizing sovereign subject. In lieu of such critiques, recent works in embodiment attempt to combine the

conceptual insights of theories of performativity with detailed attention to the political, economic and cultural geographies of specific everyday practices. Attuned focus is placed on how individuals draw upon complex significations in her/his practice of space through encounters and events. Performance, especially in the dynamic components of performativity is potentially unsettling. Ordinary life actions, incidental but semi-attached to cultural contexts can be open to re-arrangement; prefigured representations open to refiguring rather than only focus around intentions and competencies (Crouch and Desforges, 2003). It is only through a consideration of the performative that the embodiment contemplations of everyday life be understood in terms of enaction and immanence, always in the process of 'becoming' (Harrison, 1999). 'Becoming' is not only about profound re-arrangement of the self; it is also about the making and re-making of the spaces in which the self is performed (Rose, 1999).

The concept of embodiment may seem sophisticated theoretically but many have drawn attention to the methodological and representational cul-de-sacs in utilizing this concept to geographical analyses (Castree and MacMillan, 2004; Thien, 2005). As Nash (2000: 662) puts it in a series of thought-provoking questions: How can the precognitive body practices be known or is the effort to understand and communicate abandoned in favour of abstract theorizing of the non representable? Are ethnographic research methods as redundant as textual or visual sources since they invite people to speak and therefore cannot access the preverbal? This is clearly in line with Laurier and Philo's (2006) insistence that there are things that we (humans) can feel, sense and express that are unspeakable, unsayable and unwriteable. Building on these debates, Paul Harrison (2007) in his recent article gives a convincing account to unravel the myth concerning the

impossibility of relating the non-relational. Using the example of embodied experience of pain and loss, he exemplifies the impossibility of suffering in another's place, that meaning, representation, language, will always fall short, will always fail to make us experience what the other has experienced. "If someone wanted to impart their physical pain, he would be forced to inflict it" (Harrison, 2007: 605). Taking heed from Butler (2001), he argues that this impasse occurs as highly personalized embodied accounts must make use of a "language which is not and could not be one's own and which come freighted with meanings beyond one's choice and control and to which one is subject" (Harrison, 2007: 600). This is precisely what Derrida (1998) meant by, "I only have one language yet it is not mine", when addressing similar concerns. However, Harrison purports that the inadequacy of writing and knowledge of embodied experiences should not deter the conduct of research in such areas. Rather, by bringing attention such limits, there is at the same time hope in this unknowing. It affirms that in the very impossibility of containing or rendering transparent the encounter with otherness lies the essential openness of the future. The encounter with what is outside of thought—the shock of unknowing—is what propels us to try and make sense of the world (c.f. Laurier and Philo, 2006; Clark, forthcoming). This incomprehensibility as Jacques Derrida (1978: 98) puts it, "is not the beginning of irrationalism but the wound or inspiration which opens speech and then makes possible every logos or every rationalism." The world is inexhaustibly detailed and full of surprises that are only revealed in engagements with it in its specificity.

Yielding an always emergent ontology denoted by 'fluidity' and whose spontaneity replaces the 'eternal', the concept of embodiment provides immense

opportunities for analyzing volunteering practices by Singaporeans as sensuous encounters in place. Besides employing participant observation to gain insights to embodied practices of volunteering, in-depth interviews were also used to tease out volunteers' narratives of place and self in accordance to their individual experiences. By looking at the narratives of place, the stories, the myths that are associated with people and place, and by acknowledging the complexities involved in the ways in which people actively engage with their environment, together with the tensions between expectation and realization, we can arrive at a clearer appreciation of the production and consumption of volunteering spaces (Meethan, 2006). In addition, narrative of the self is important as it is only through an ongoing story about the self that volunteers can provide herself or himself with a sense of continuity in their identity (Desforges, 2000; Elsrud, 2001). The active narration of the embodied experiences of volunteering allows for self-actualization where identities have to be renegotiated, new autobiographies constructed and new trajectories set (Giddens, 1991; Noy, 2004).

6.3 Volunteering and the role of visual culture

As espoused in the earlier section, recent works on embodiment has sought productive intersections with theories of performativity, thus exhibiting renewed interest in subjective emotional and physical experience of making sense of various forms of representations in relation to bodily engagement. The section will specifically consider the motivations behind volunteerism by Singaporeans and their spatial practice of volunteering, showing their dynamic interactions with visual representations of the IOT. It must be re-iterated that volunteers are not actors in prefigured structures of meanings—they are participatory agents in the practice and performing of places and their lives.

Hence visual culture may be become significant more through a process of practice and refiguring rather than a 'completed' object, a resource through which identities may be felt, rediscovered or challenged (Crouch and Lubbren, 2001).

In the previous chapter, the power of tsunami-related visual imageries was exemplified through a critical analysis of the geographical enfolding of object and subject. Many Singaporeans who donate to tsunami affected peoples and places are motivated by the often dramatized images and media reports about the tsunami. Working in very similar ways, visual representations of the IOT enable Singaporeans to encounter the needs of tsunami 'victims' thus inducing volunteering acts. However a common thread linking many of interviewee's responses is the desire to distinguish between volunteering and monetary donations, with the denunciation of the latter as inadequate given the dramatic extent of the disaster:

> During the period of the tsunami, what you see everyday [in the newspapers] is bodies, bodies and more dead bodies. It was traumatizing for me. Donation just isn't good enough for me. To me it's just like sitting there and doing nothing. My first thought was: if I don't go over and physically help these people, my conscience can never take it (Ka Huat)
>
> I was shocked by those images...mass graves, orphans crying in the streets. Helpless is the word…I donated money because I came to know about this tragic event through these reports and images in the Straits Times. But you know I didn't feel too good even after I donated…The only way to truly understand their sufferings is to go there, see the situation and experience what they are going through. Only then can we claim that we truly understand and are truly compassionate and responsible people (Mr Sng)
>
> I pulled several of my friends to join a volunteering team to Phi Phi Island after I saw the extent of destruction and death through images in the newspapers. Donations are simply not ethical. You need to go there to physically make a difference. If the pictures can already convey how bad the situation is, you really have to get down to the ground. Let me tell you, it's always ten times worse on the ground. You will have to have first

> hand experience to know how bad it is. Only volunteering can make you realize that (Kevin)

It perhaps comes as little surprise that the fetishization of (dead) bodies by the local media has resulted in respondents' preoccupation with such images. However what is interesting is that *similar* images can provoke highly distinct responses from Singaporeans. As Crang (1996) argues, there is never one standard interpretation to visual representations. Visual culture must be reconsidered in terms of a more complex practice of subjectivities as individuals have the ability to attach their own meanings to representations based on their personal negotiation of the world around them. Hence while some interviewees are contented with engaging solely in monetary donations to help tsunami 'victims' after being exposed to dramatic images, others are far more critical of this particular practice of generosity. As can be seen from the quotes above, volunteering acts are imagined as being more responsible/ethical since unlike donations, it does not foreclose the possibility of witnessing *direct* impacts made on people's lives. Furthermore, there is a common sentiment that despite the 'shock' effect that these images convey, they fail to translate the full repercussions of the disaster. It is only through embodied practices like volunteer work that enables a grounded assessment of the actual situation which will consequently fuel more intense motivating desire to engage in volunteerism.

No doubt that media's bodily representations of the tsunami continue to dominate volunteers' narratives, there are however other images of different thematic focus that caught the attention of many Singaporeans, motivating them to engage in volunteerism as well. In particular, many highlighted their fixation on news and photos related to other

people's volunteer work in tsunami hit places, professing such articulations of (usually) enriching embodied experiences are inspirations that spark off their impetus to go overseas and do something for needy 'victims'. As my focus group discussion reveals:

Chih Yuan: So images are important reasons why all of you volunteer. From what I gather so far, it's all about images of bodies and helpless people? What do all you think of such images that are featured in the media?

Joshua: Not all about bodies lah [sic]. I admit these images have a huge effect on why I became a volunteer but to make things less grim, other more "happy" images have also the same effect on me. Especially when I see pictures of volunteers helping others and the happy faces of the victims. I always love the idea of going to other places to volunteer and making friends with people from other countries.

Pek Chng: I agree with Joshua. For me, I am very timid. If you want me to help, don't show me bloody pictures or rotten corpses. I wouldn't dare to go. Basically I went because I saw those pictures of volunteers doing something for the people there and their accounts sounded like it is a very fulfilling task. It is different from doing volunteerism at home. When you are overseas, everything is different—the language, the culture, the people. You will have to face more challenges. That's why it's more noble.

Siok Heng: Yes, that's why I always think that the newspapers should always feature more of such images and reports, to show how fulfilling volunteer work is. Then maybe more people will go. Not only on dead bodies and about destruction.

Chih Yuan: So all of you think that the media should review the way they report on disasters? Focus less on bodies and numbers?

Joshua: It's actually a very tricky balance. You see, when people see images of bodies, and helpless people, they will feel inclined to help in terms of donating money. From my experience, many people are however scared to volunteer when they see such images because they have the same reaction as Pek Chng. All the blood, chaos, gore. I always realize that news reports always focus on number of dead people and bodies just after the occurrence of the disaster. The volunteering images come much later. Maybe they should also have such images in the early stages so as to get both

> donators and volunteers. (All focus group members nod in agreement)

From the series of fascinating exchanges above, it is not difficult to see that accounts and images of overseas volunteering transpired through the media promises that such embodied experiences will ensure participants achieving a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction. A spatial distinction is set up to differentiate between volunteering at home and volunteering in other contexts. The challenges that volunteers have to overcome in a completely foreign place so as to ensure their work gets completed make volunteering under such conditions more noble. It is premised upon such positive assurance that many respondents are motivated to spend time volunteering overseas to help tsunami 'victims'. Hence dominant constructions of volunteerism by the media have the effect of shaping Singaporeans' imaginings of the benefits involved in such embodied practices. Furthermore, the responses arising out of this focus group affirm and validate Mr Lim's postulation mentioned in the previous chapter. Besides grim images of dead bodies, alternative visual representations connoting improved rehabilitation of tsunami affected places culminating from the efforts of various agents can also motivate generous practices. Interestingly, there is an implicit consensus that certain kinds of images can induce specific practices of generosity. It is suggested that media's hype around dead bodies and massive destruction can in fact be a double-edged sword—eliciting more donations while simultaneously deterring volunteerism. Since reports and images associated with volunteerism are given less priority both spatially and temporally, respondents reflect upon the possibility of reversing this trend for the availability of more pathways to induce volunteerism from Singaporeans.

Many respondents were not willing to stop at merely discussing about the imag(in)ings of volunteer work. Rather they were eager to divulge deeper insights to the materialization of their acts of volunteerism and share their embodied experiences often in relation to their initial (mis)conceptions of such work. Indeed many were quick to do conduct introspective reflections, professing how the *doing* of volunteerism has immense influence on their perceptions of the self:

> Actually I really doubted my abilities when I first came, about whether I can make it as a volunteer. First I didn't know how to speak Thai and second, I must admit I am pampered. I was terribly afraid that I couldn't cope with the backward rural lifestyle. And when they wanted me to help build a school, I was stunned. I didn't know anything about construction. However I really wanted to challenge myself. Slowly, every brick I put into building the school, I gained more confidence. And the local people weren't difficult to communicate with. Even though there were language barriers, we did things together and they even helped me settle in to the local lifestyle. And when it's finally completed, it felt so good and fulfilling. But it was also a sad thing because that means I have to leave all those friends that I made…I hugged my best Thai friend that I made there and we both cried. (Lai Yee)

Lai Yee's account shows her desire to use the volunteering experience to realize a "different, undeveloped side of [her] personality or to take on a new role in a context where no one will make [her] conform to expectations about [herself]" (Edensor, 2000: 325). Describing her everyday mundane activities of stacking bricks and constructing buildings, she narrates a story of self discovery where she is able to come to terms with her abilities to perform the identity of a successful volunteer. In addition, her ability to overcome the multiple challenges in a foreign context makes the job of volunteerism all the more enriching. It is also important to note that the *interactions* between Lai Yee and the local Thais have the ability to influence her volunteering experiences. It is precisely

due to the friendships she made and the warm hospitality that she received in a foreign country that makes her whole volunteering work memorable. Such narratives of self change enable her to gain a sense of fulfillment, very much in alliance with media's romanticization of the alleged benefits of volunteerism. In addition, many interviewees expressed strong sentiments of being enlightened on the ontological meaning of being 'human'. Indeed, they argue it is precisely due to the nature of volunteering which allows for close encounters between people that brings out the human(e)ness of such acts, an emotional experience that donations can never bring about:

> When I interact with the victims and they reciprocate my actions even with just a simple smile, I feel so good as a person since I am able to help fellow human beings in need. That's how being human should be right? Even though he's a Thai and I am a Singaporean, it doesn't matter (Shaun).

> Donations can never let you get close to people. It is only through interactions that you develop personal relationships and feel for the victims. Slowly you can identify with them as fellow human beings, not so much different from any one of us (Raynard).

Volunteering as articulated by Shaun and Raynard, has the ability to overcome differences and accentuate commonality. Being in geographical proximity allows the arbitrary categories of nationality and race to be thrown into disarray as the spatial boundaries between 'self' and 'other' are being bridged. Hence these categories of identification cease to become barriers for understanding; rather through practices and encounters, 'victims' and volunteers are linked together by their common identity of being human.

In addition, there were many respondents who felt compelled to provide more accurate representations of tsunami hit places. These alternative narratives of place

usually arose out of a concern for media's skewed and myopic focus on certain negative aspects of affected areas. As one interviewee who volunteered in Phi Phi Island, Thailand puts it:

> I was mentally prepared to see a lot of dead bodies, helpless people and chaotic situation. When I went there to volunteer, yes there were such things but there were a lot more. The newspapers never show how these places are recovering. The newspapers also never show how local people are not that helpless but are doing things to get back to their normal lives. Just look at this [shows me a picture of him building houses with local Thai people],we can work with the local people to achieve something. It's not that pessimistic like what the media says. After going there and experiencing all these, I really know the Phi Phi better and not through images from the media. I changed my opinion a lot. (Mr Kwek)

Mr Kwek is definitely not alone in engaging in narratives of self change, showing how the embodied experiences gained from volunteering are important in altering his opinions of the place he worked in. Dispelled are those perceptions of tsunami hit places as having nothing more than just dead bodies and helpless victims. Through practices of volunteering, participants are able to gain improved knowledge of places and realize themselves as astute and discerning subjects rather than being partially-informed individuals whose geographical imaginations of tsunami affected areas are delineated by the media. In addition, photographs of places where volunteers conduct work in were commonly produced during interviews. Crang (1997) terms this process as "proprioception" to suggest the links which are forged between bodies and technologies (in this case, the camera) in their appropriation of place through technologized practices. Cameras are utilized to create particular experiences of place and space which will have inevitably have effects on subjectification (Crouch and Desforges, 2003). Following Butler (2004), identity is a 'doing' and cannot be considered as a stable entity. The

constant mobilization of places through material images circulating in photographs has the effect of (re)producing the identity of the volunteer and evoking memories of his/her experiences of volunteerism. Place is being disseminated and the roles that it performs in subjectification can no longer be equated with stability (Coleman and Crang, 2002).

6.4 Volunteering and the role of the state

From the preceding two chapters, I have exemplified pleas from the government to exhort Singaporeans to engage in generous practices to help tsunami affected peoples and places. Monetary donation proffers one avenue into the materialization of such appeals but as President Nathan (2005) suggests, volunteer work is also critically essential given that it is an exemplary practice that showcases Singapore's status as a 'caring nation' to the rest of the world. Hence, volunteerism is no longer merely constructed as an act required of ethical citizens; it is also an expression of nationalism where citizens can show their patriotism for the country by promoting the goodwill of Singapore through embodied practices in tsunami affected countries (see Sin, 2006). In Singapore, many have observed that there is often spearheading actions by the state in various aspects so as to encourage citizens to follow likewise. For example, Perry *et al* (1997) have critically examined the role of the state in charting the developmental path of Singapore. With the setting up of government linked companies to partake in overseas investment, they argue that the Singapore state attempts to convey a strong message to local firms that in order to stay competitive in this globalizing economy, regionalization is the only option. While the common interpretation of such endeavours points to the over-reliance of Singaporeans on the state, the government prefers the countervailing discourse of seeing itself as a role model for its citizens (Chua, 1995). Indeed imbued

with such a mindset, it is perhaps not surprising that the Singapore government was quick to send out disaster relief teams in the name of 'international aid'. Personnel from the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) were mobilized and stationed at various locations in the region to carry out volunteering work in hope that more Singaporeans will follow suit.

Conducting interviews with soldiers from the SAF who were involved in volunteering overseas revealed their desire to accomplish the tasks set by the organization. Indeed, many of such narratives were framed in such a way to highlight their responsibility as a citizen in carrying out a duty for the country. As Captain Tan Leong Boon, who led a team of soldiers to Banda Aceh to help in reconstruction projects in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami proclaims:

> I went to volunteer because I have a mission. And this mission is very important to me and to Singapore. If you want to put it plainly, it's an exercise of diplomacy. My team and I have to show that Singapore is willing to help its neighbours when they are in trouble. That's why we have to be careful about what we do because we represent the country. We have to come in first to set good relations with the local people and government so that other volunteers and aid from Singapore can then arrive. Money cannot buy relations. You have to build it through volunteering, through participating in these projects. We made many friends and they are very friendly to Singaporeans now.

Captain Tan's motivation to donate stems from a responsibility given to him by the country and organization. Volunteer work is not just simply a generous act conducted for needy others; it has also been instilled as a tool for building diplomatic ties with recipient countries. And the performance of this duty has to be handled with care as volunteering practices are no longer a matter that solely concerns individuals. These practices have far broader consequences, as they will be used as a gauge to judge Singapore's contribution to tsunami affected regions. Captain Tan's narrative also affirms an earlier point made

about the state taking the initiative so that it can become a role model for citizens to follow. Captain Tan and his team are hence tasked with pushing the frontiers, illuminating the path for other Singaporeans who might be interested to become volunteers. And this task can only be accomplished through embodied practices such as volunteering since it is only through such endeavours that place-specific relationships can be forged. Indeed the very nature of volunteerism, which usually involves encounters and gaining highly embodied experiences are exactly what drive many Singaporeans to participate in it. As Dr Ong Jit Kuan, a SAF doctor who provided medical assistance to Sri Lanka concurs:

> When I heard from SAF HQ that they [tsunami hit countries] needed doctors desperately, I immediately offered to go. Medical aid is not like any other kinds of aid. You have to be there personally to administer it. You have to be attentive to the victims and develop close ties with them so that they will trust you. This can only be done through volunteering overseas.

Dr Ong's decision to volunteer in Sri Lanka is attributed to the necessity of a personal touch to medical aid which is in close congruence with what volunteering entails—engaging in embodied practices. Such practices not only allow for personal relationships to be developed but they also have great impacts on the formation of the self. As Dr Ong further exemplifies:

> Patients will always ask me where I come from after I treat them. When I tell them I am from Singapore, they will always give me a thumbs up, indicating that Singaporeans are kind to help them. Such simple actions always make me feel that I haven't failed in my role that is entrusted to me. I still remember a patient, a little girl who drew me a card to show her appreciation. On the card, she even drew a Singapore flag…It's times like these that I really feel proud being a Singaporean.

Hence from the above quote, through the doing of volunteerism, Dr Ong realizes himself as a responsible Singaporean who has performed the duty given to him by the state. Such nationalist sentiments are further reinforced when his work is being appreciated by the local people, which accentuates his identity of being Singaporean. Indeed this feeling of national pride is similarly articulated in many other narratives which centre on the issues related to selfhood. For instance Captain Tan sees himself as an "ambassador of the country" while another respondent even quoted former American President JK Kennedy's famous phrase "Don't ask what the country can do for you but what you can do for the country" to show his willingness to engage in volunteer work in order for self actualization as a upholder and defender of Singapore's good image. Hence, as we can see identities are worked and negotiated through embodied practice, encounter and energy and in social relations in a construction of distinctive situational meanings by self and inter-subjective interpreting individuals and in rhetorical exchange (Billig, 1991).

Inevitably, there were undercurrents of resistance to state's deployment of troops to carry out volunteer work in tsunami affected countries, especially when such a move is usually enforced and leaves no room for rejections for those involved. This invites rethinking of what exactly constitutes volunteerism, a point raised in a focus group discussion comprising of several ex-soldiers who were sent by the SAF to do 'volunteer' work in Banda Aceh in 2005:

Jacky: What we did was not volunteering. To volunteer is to do something out of own free will. But we had no choice. It was an order imposed on us.

Kenny: Yah, I agree. Volunteering is good. It gives you good experience, something you can never learn from schools or elsewhere. You can make friends with other volunteers and develop relationships with

people you help. That's all very nice. But it's not nice when you are forced to do it. What's the point of volunteering then?

Chih Yuan: So can I say that all of you do not really see yourself as volunteers per se and do not like this arrangement by the SAF?

Daniel: Initially, yes. I think I can safely speak on behalf of the rest since we have always joked about this. Before we went we always tell others that we are not volunteers, we are just free labourers. To put it more crudely, we are tools for the government to 'por' [Hokkein dialect that denotes to win favour from] other countries and prove to them that Singapore is a caring neighbour.

In complete opposition to the earlier comments from Captain Tan and Dr Ong, the soldiers in this focus group have no reservations in showing their cynicism for SAF's decision in sending them overseas to act as volunteers. While they all admit that volunteer work is beneficial to the self as individuals can gain useful experience through embodied practices, they however take active agency in debunking any romanticization that what they do is considered as volunteer work. Indeed another soldier that I conducted a separate interview with even went into the etymology of the word "volunteer" in order to convince me that he cannot be viewed as a volunteer. As Estifania (2002: 133) suggests, where volunteer service is compelled by the state, or when there is a strong political or moral suasion from the state, the work of volunteers may "lose its core essence, which is the voluntary giving of oneself for a cause in one believes in." Hence, as we can see, these soldiers attach alternative meanings to their work, displaying their contempt for the state in treating them as dehumanized entities ('tools' as Daniel puts it) so as to score victory in a diplomatic battle. Going overseas to volunteer is not a duty or responsibility to them; rather their motivation (or rather the lack of it) to engage in 'volunteerism' is a task enforced unto them where refusal is not an option.

Daniel in the excerpt of the focus group discussion above relayed the team's *initial* sentiments about their overseas volunteering mission. As the focus group proceeded, the team began to shed revelations about their actual work in Aceh and how such practices on the ground are implicated in a process of self change. Indeed many of them exhibit a seemingly softening of their initial critical stance towards the state and SAF and engage in a narrative of changing opinions of this whole volunteering exercise.

Chih Yuan: Can you elaborate more on your experiences there? What did you think about the whole volunteer work?

Daniel: As I told you, I was very unhappy I was forced to go to Aceh in the first place. I did not put my heart and soul in doing the work there. We were asked to build a temporary shelter there but I took my time, dilly dally around, not being serious at all.

Kenny: (Facing Daniel) Yes aren't you ashamed that all of us are working so hard while you were slacking? (all laugh)

Daniel: That was at the beginning lah. But when I saw all of you (the rest of the team) working so hard and I saw how bad the situation on the ground is, I really felt that I wanted to do something. Also when the local Thai people came up to you every single day to thank you for your help and for bringing them hope, do you think I could still sit there and pretend to be doing work? No! That's when my whole outlook changed. I started to be more enthusiastic and I really learned a lot. Then I realized, hey it's not so bad for SAF to send us here in the first place. It may not be volunteer work when they forced us to come here but I learned about being a volunteer through doing all these things and interacting with people. I would never have done it on my own. So I guess I have to thank SAF. (laughs)

Kenny: I was also quite resentful that I had to come to this place to volunteer. My first impression when I heard that I was sent to Aceh was: oh god, how am I going to survive in such a 'ulu' [in Malay denoting obscurity] place? But after working here for some time, I also changed my outlook. The people are friendly, the place is scenic and beautiful.

Jacky: Wah [sic], looks like I also have to say I have changed my views too right? But seriously, I can vouch that we did. We learned much more about the Aceh—the culture, the people, everything. I remembered the whole group of us went out with some of our university friends. We were talking of Aceh politics and the Free Aceh Movement. All the other friends who were not involved in volunteer work in Aceh kept talking about why the ordinary folks want to get involved in this and how they must be feeling miserable. They also had the imagination that Aceh is a really backward place. And so, Daniel, Kenny and myself had to tell them how they are wrong and the people and place are not like what they think…They also learned a great deal from us. (laughs)

This rich focus group discussion reveals nuanced details about how the *doing* of volunteerism can contribute to an ongoing sense of identity and bring about personal development. For Daniel, even though he does not see himself as a volunteer initially, the performing of volunteer work makes him pick up the necessary skills and knowledges (learning-by-doing) that eventually enables the formation of his subject position as a volunteer. Peer pressure, first hand witnessing of the dramatic situation on the ground and the hope that the local community placed in him also have the effect of making him take volunteer work seriously. This resonates well with an earlier point that situational encounters with the place and people through volunteering have the propensity in further augmenting the imperative to engage in such acts. Narratives of self change were also present throughout the conversation where they had opinion changes about the initial feelings of negativity about volunteer work in Aceh. Daniel even goes so far to talk about the opportunities that SAF provided him to engage in a fulfilling experience of being a volunteer. Furthermore, their self change can also be deciphered from their professed improved knowledge of Aceh and its culture. Overseas volunteering thus provides an opportunity to learn more about a foreign place in which volunteering at home cannot

offer. As sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991, cited in Desforges, 2000: 935) expounds, encounters can constitute "fateful moments", "significant points of transition in people's lives where reflexivity is heightened because decisions have to be made about the self and self actualization that will have repercussions for self-identity and lifestyle for a considerable number of years ahead." Even though all three members of the focus group have now moved on to other things in life, their identities and experiences as a volunteer are constantly evoked through their narratives of place to their friends. It is important to note that the dissemination of place (in this case, Aceh) through oral descriptions can no longer be said to affect the self only; the consumption of such narratives by audience can also have the effect of producing new knowledges for them.

6.5 Volunteering and the role of NGOs

In the burgeoning literature on the topic of volunteering, there exists a specific strand of work which seeks to examine the role of non governmental voluntary organizations in shaping motivations to volunteer (Scott and Meyer, 1994; Sheard 1995; see Fyfe and Milligan, 2003 for a review on volunteerism). This section contributes to this area of concern by investigating the effects of appeals for generous practices by NGOs within Singapore on volunteers. While recognizing the potential strength of discourses by NGOs and the potential institutionalizing of habitual practice within such organizations, I nevertheless echo MacDonald and Warburton (2003) in arguing that volunteers contribute to the discursive construction, and perhaps deconstruction of the institutional order of the field in which they work.

In the interviews conducted with Singaporeans who volunteered through NGOs, many professed that they were seduced by the appeals from these organizations. As

discussed in Chapter 4, non-religious NGOs attempt to elicit generous responses via the pathway of secular humanism while faith-based ones plea for similar responses based on discourses of *agape*. Indeed such strategies of appeals by NGOs seem to work with great effect as many volunteers couched their motivations to engage in such practices utilizing very similar terms:

> I can only say it was God who sent me, personally being a Christian. To me, monetary donations are not good enough. Volunteering is different. The victims can feel the care and love of me and God through our intimate interactions. And it is not everyday you can spread the love of God people other than your friends and fellow Singaporeans (Joanne Tan, volunteer with YMCA)

> My temple was looking for volunteers to go to Khao Lat (Thailand) to help rebuild and take care of those victims of the tsunami. A session was held to tell us the importance of volunteering overseas and how the tsunami offers an opportunity to spread their love to a wider area. After that, I realized that there is more to donations. Through my work, I can not only follow the teachings of Buddha but the victims can also feel the compassionate side of Buddhism (Mrs Low, volunteer with Buddhist Research Society; translated from Mandarin)

> When the tsunami struck, I wanted to know if I could contribute something. So I went to the Red Cross Website and I realized that volunteers were needed. They talked about how we have to do our part as human beings to help others in distress and we can achieve much more by volunteering. I think it makes sense and it's only right for me to do it in the name of justice. (Corrine, volunteer with the Singapore Red Cross)

For those followers of a religion, participating in volunteerism overseas through their respective faith-based NGOs has the ability for them to spread the love of the religion to a wider geographical area and exemplify that religion actually negates borders. Indeed, to them, such acts are in line with the teachings of the religion and congruent with the ethos of the organization they are affiliated to. Similarly, Corrine and many like-minded volunteers who represent the secular NGOs such as the Singapore Red Cross (SRC) in

this overseas mission of helping tsunami 'victims' often actively subscribe to the organizational appeals that are premised upon humanist ideals advocating for some sort of social justice. Social justice implies that generosity should not be restricted within national boundaries but how it is also crucial to extend such acts to all human beings living in the same world. Also regardless of whether they are religiously oriented or not, interviewees often perceive volunteering overseas as being able to do "much more". Discursive constructions of volunteer work by NGOs as being highly desirable (more so than monetary donations) are internalized by volunteers as seen from their iterative articulations of how it is only through the administering of such generous acts that positive material consequences can be generated.

The extensive focus on NGOs' continual encouragement and valorization of volunteer work may often lead us to neglect the fact that NGOs remain fertile recruiting ground for volunteers. The crux here lies not in the act of volunteering *per se*; rather it revolves around the avenues and networks that enable volunteering to occur in the first place. As my respondent Ka Huat, explains:

> I very much wanted to be a volunteer after hearing so many good things about volunteering and the situation in those tsunami countries. But I would never have been able to do it on my own. That's why I needed the Buddhist Research Society. So it's fair to say my motivation to volunteer also comes from the possibility that I could do so. So even though I am a free-thinker and not a Buddhist, I joined the society…

Ka Huat's motivation to become a volunteer was cemented with the availability of an avenue through which his desire can be materialized. Here, insights can be gained about individual agency where strategies are actively employed in order for the formation of the volunteer identity. Furthermore, such networks offered by the organization provide

support and protection for the volunteers to carry out their work in an unfamiliar terrain. Similar to some other respondents, Ka Huat's enthusiasm in wanting to do something for the tsunami 'a victim overwhelms his reservations about joining an organization whose religious underpinnings he has no identification with. Insofar they are not "forced to convert", as most interviewees put it, they are willing to join a religious organization for the sake of volunteering.

Having previous experiences of volunteering via NGOs is another vector of motivation for Singaporeans to engage in similar practices again. Several of my respondents linked their current volunteer work with motivation drawn from such experiences:

> I learnt alot from the last volunteering exercise I had with the Red Cross. It was a mission to build some facilities such as schools for poor Indonesian kids. Hence when the Red Cross wanted volunteers to help in the tsunami, I immediately volunteered because of my good experience last time…I always try to volunteer overseas as I think it's more challenging doing things in a faraway place. More importantly, I want to help more people, not only Singaporeans because I think Singaporeans are much more fortunate people. (Chee Siong, volunteer with the SRC)

> I always participate in volunteer work organized by my church. After all, as Christians, I think it is important to help those in need. And I always get a sense of achievement after doing all these work. So this time is no different. Except that it [volunteer work] is of a much larger scale and things would be much more difficult. I expect much more challenges interacting with the local community. I must get myself prepared (Serene Chong, volunteer with the Methodist Church)

Memories of *positive* experiences gained from (overseas) volunteering have the ability to enable the continuation of such practices in the long term. As Bachelard (2000: 57) argues, people will only retain the "memory of events that have created us at the decisive instants of our pasts." Previous attempts at volunteer work have greatly benefited Chee

Siong and Serene that they are willing to 'transpose' such acts into the present. Memory like space can be temporalized and can re-invigorate what one is doing now. For Chee Siong, the recollection of spaces outside national boundaries hold more significance for him as he thinks that people in many foreign countries require more help than Singaporeans. Serene on the other hand expresses hope that the lessons learned from her previous volunteering work at home can be extended to larger geographical scales to help more needy people. But as Crang (2001) reminds us, while memory is reinvigorated and re-routed into the 'now', it can never be an exact re-run of the past. Hence Serene and Chee Siong are both aware that the nature and scope of their current volunteer work is never going to replicate previous experiences as can be seen from their self professed understanding of doing overseas volunteerism for such a major disaster. Memory operates as an active character of performativity where different encounters can subject it to disruptions and re-figuring.

In the actual doing of volunteerism, there are a range of differences which mark out different volunteers working through NGOs as having different characteristics. One difference lies in the choice between 'front' and 'back' tasks within the services provided (Goffman, 1968). Take for example my key participant observation site, a relief centre which provides temporary shelter for tsunami 'victims' in Phi Phi Island (Thailand). There is a substantial number of international NGOs conducting volunteer work at this shelter including two Singapore based NGOs which is of interest here: The SRC and the Methodist Church (MC). Volunteers working in this area are either known as "frontliners"—those who have direct encounters with 'victims'—or "support team"—those who are involved in behind the scenes task and do not require any contact with the

'victims'. While such a front-back distinction was also observed by Chiang (2005) in his study of Singaporeans doing volunteerism in local nursing homes, what is interesting here is perhaps that many respondents expressed their preference for the support team. More often than not, only in cases where the volunteer knows the local language or have previous experiences interacting with Thai people will he/she choose to partake in frontline tasks. This is due to the unique situation of working in a foreign context that perhaps puts increased challenge on the volunteer to possess certain interactive skills. I spoke to volunteers, Lai Geok from SRC and Jane from MC, both of whom are members of the 'support team' whose job scope involves cleaning and cooking.

> Well I am not looking for glory. Some people have to do these at-the-back kinds of jobs right? I still consider myself a volunteer and I still think that this is still a noble job. Besides I have been a frontliner before. All of you think that it is a job where people will appreciate you more. It's not true. If you don't know how to speak Thai, it's difficult to communicate with the victims. They [the victims] say I am cold and unfriendly. That's not true! I just don't know how to interact with them without even speaking their language (Lai Geok)

> Some people just don't like going out front because they find it intimidating. I have been in the front too. It used to be interesting but it was also challenging…a lot of troubles happening….too challenging for me I guess. I still remember when I first started out, I wanted to help the victims by preaching to them about Christianity. However this is a Buddhist society. They don't want to listen to me and they don't like me to preach. But it's my mission here. So after a while I decided to switch to the back. I find it more relaxing at the back. Cooking and cleaning may be menial stuff but they are essential too (Jane)

Volunteers involved in the 'back support' are able to express care and respect in a context where no direct encounter (appreciative or otherwise) with tsunami 'victims' is possible or necessary. Interestingly, each has previous done 'front' duties where encounter was integral but had gravitated to back support in search of continued service but in a less

stressful setting. As Lai Geok reveals, individuals need to possess the necessary communication tools so as to effectively carry frontline work. Without a common language for example, there is little room for meaningful interactions possibly leading to unhappy outcomes. Jane on the other hand finds it difficult to negotiate her role as a Christian in a cultural context where the majority of the people are Buddhist. Nonetheless, both Lai Geok and Jane continue to re-iterate the importance of their work and it is through the execution of such noble task, as Lai Geok puts it, that their identity as an ethical volunteer is being actualized. Hence the discourses and practices of volunteering at this temporary shelter is framed to some extent by these front/back distinctions. For some a form of service remote from contact with homeless people is desired, while others seek the interest of conversation and maybe even the challenge of dealing with trouble. Although connections and relations with tsunami victims differ in terms of front and back roles, the overarching desire to be involved in a response to these people's needs is a key factor. Such spaces reflect different performative roles, emotions and expectations, with the availability of diverse service niches bringing together potentially disparate volunteers around a common cause.

However for many volunteers working under religious NGOs like MC, it can be observed that front roles are discursively constructed as more desirable and hence preferred. As many of these volunteers express their desire to preach or share their faith with tsunami victims, face-to-face interactions become a necessary dimension of their work. However not everyone can get an opportunity to be a frontliner; organizations such as the MC intervenes to decide the candidates who are more suited for this challenging

work. As Florence a volunteer with MC but who is also the person in charge of work allocation, explains:

> I know most people in my team want to be involved in frontline job because they want to spread the love of God. If this was volunteer work in Singapore, I think I will try to rotate their roles to make sure all of them get what they want. But we are in a foreign country here. There are rules who have to observe. There are language barriers. I only try to give those frontline tasks to those who can speak Thai or have a way in interacting with the locals. We have to do this so that our work can be carried out smoothly.

Once again, we are reminded that volunteering overseas in an unfamiliar terrain involves significant challenges and interactions with the local people may be hampered by the lack of necessary skills. Indeed a particular incident that happened at my participant observation field site that involved with two volunteers from MC further illustrates the above point poignantly:

> Caroline just finished feeding lunch to a group of orphans who lost their parents to the tsunami. As she was walking back to the kitchen, a senior staff from MC asked her to help trim the fingernails of a small boy. Caroline apparently looked stunned by the request but she obliged. As she approached the boy with a nail-cutter, the boy started crying seemingly refusing to let Caroline do her job. Upon seeing this Caroline walked away and told a fellow volunteer (Liana, 59) nearby that the boy did not want his fingernails cut. Liana took the nail cutter over from Caroline and wanted to do the job instead. When watching in action, one would think that she found the boy very endearing—singing Thai Christian songs to him, patting him on the arm while trimming his fingernails etc…..Liana seems to have a way of getting little kids to do anything. "She had one guy hugging her tonight. Rather her than me" (this is a comment from another volunteer). One of the other volunteers laughed and said that she thought Liana was a bit of a 'mother figure' to some of the tsunami 'victims' (Participant observation, 26/2/05)

Although these kinds of performative relations are by no means dependent on the maternal role and the gender relations attendant to that role, this example illustrates the performance of a mother figure bringing the space of care and volunteering into 'being'. Liana's passion for tsunami 'victims' shines through in terms of her interactions with individuals which involve strong elements of embodiment along with singing and laughter. Liana's personal ethos is expressed in terms of her Christian faith, where she articulates her desire to "spread the love of God to everyone" in my interview with her. Besides understanding that spaces of volunteering and care are performatively brought into being, it can also be argued that the self is performatively brought in being as well. Liana professes that through her volunteering acts, she is able to realise herself as a "good follower of the religion". Narratives of self change were also evident when she claims that she has "developed closer links with God spiritually" through the performing of volunteer work. Conversely Caroline seemed reluctant to work as a 'frontliner' and is resistant to engage in much physical interaction with tsunami 'victims'. However an interview with her reveals her guilt and dismay at not being able to do so:

> I envy Liana. She seems so natural at interacting with those kids and tsunami 'victims'. My interactions skills are very poor and worse of all I don't know how to speak Thai. Also I know it's wrong to think like this but when I have to cut the fingernails or help a person who has difficulty moving wipe his backside after shitting, I feel disgusted. I just can't do it. I have always talked to my pastor working here too about my failure here as a Christian. I cannot help to spread the faith since I can mostly act as back support. But he tells me that it's alright… as long as I have tried. I have come to accept this and I still feel I am much better than those people who just donate or just do volunteering in Singapore. At least I take up th challenge and slog it out here in a foreign country. I am sure God will understand my difficulties.

Caroline's expression of guilt at not being able to carry out frontline work shows the importance of such work contributes to her self identity as a good Christian. Her sense of failure comes from her inability to have any sort of encounters with the 'victims', thereby spreading the faith becomes a matter beyond her. However, she tries to rationalize her feelings of failure by defending herself through arguing that her willingness to participate in volunteering practices overseas still gives her a moral edge to those who simply engage in monetary donations or volunteer at home. Through a process of 'othering' (Sibley, 1995) in such narratives, Caroline's self identity as an ethical Christian is still being produced and reinforced.

6.6 Chapter Summary

As with monetary donations, the motivations to volunteer are plentiful. However such motivations are never ontologically present but are in fact actively produced. I have shown in this chapter the ways in which disposition to respond to tsunami affected peoples and places through volunteering are worked up and how opportunities for acting on these dispositions are organized either via the state or NGOs. Such understandings recast generosity as an embodied disposition that subsists in the practices of attending to others and in relations of responsiveness. It also signifies that generosity is a virtue that cannot be universalized precisely because of its emplacement with concrete encounters with others, no matter how mediated it may be. To reiterate once more, generosity cannot be attributed to high abstract moral arguments of altruism and self interest; rather it is a constitutive practice of sociality, community and being together.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION: THE ‘GIFT’ OF THE DISASTER

7.1 Summary

As I sat down to write this concluding chapter, I was admittedly perturbed by the turn of events. Barely two years ago, the world's attention was fixated on the IOT. The media lapsed into a frenzy to report what they saw as a newsworthy event. Governments, NGOs and researchers alike pledged their commitments to direct practical efforts in helping those who are affected. But interest in the IOT appears to be waning. There is hardly any mention in the media nowadays about the reconstruction and rehabilitation process in affected areas. Academic publications and conversations related to the IOT seem to be dwindling as well. Why is that so? Is it an inevitability that disasters initiate short term interests that are difficult to sustain over time? Is the IOT an epitome of popular and intellectual fad? It is with hope that the partial and situated knowledges on the IOT produced in this thesis will serve to extend and re-ignite conversations in this area to provide crucial political-ethical interventions.

In my study of the IOT, I have adopted the theme of generosity to critically understand the agencies and mechanisms that elicit practical actions of donations and volunteerism from Singaporeans to tsunami affected places and peoples. In the field of moral philosophy, the concept of impartial ethics of justice that premises on ideas related to social justice and human commonality is more often than not used to justify individuals' commitment to help needy distant strangers. Aligning closely with this concept, geographers have similarly indulged in moral exhortations for individual responsibility to help needy others, as exemplified by the 'caring at a distance' and 'geographies of responsibility' literature. In these conceptions, motivations for generous behaviour thus become an issue that stems solely from the sovereign self. However the

concept of generosity suggests an ongoing connection and relationship between the 'giver' and 'receiver'. It sets out to de-centre the motivation for generous practices away from the sovereign self towards responsive and attentive relations of encounters with the needs of others. Such encounters, no matter how mediated they may be, bridge the distance between the 'giver' and 'receiver', drawing them into a relation of proximity and intimacy in which one is so close as to be moved to do something for the one who appears in need. In such a formulation, generosity can be seen as a modality of power. It acts as a navigational compass to locate where appeals for care, concern and justice come from and how they are 'articulated'. It also brings into view a series of questions about the differential capacities and dispositions of individual or collective actors to be affected by and moved to respond to certain claims and not to others.

Indeed as Chapter 4 has tried to exemplify, the Singapore media is an important pathway and conduit that exposes Singaporeans to information and images of the IOT (c.f. Clark, forthcoming). I have argued that certain dominant imag(in)ings are transpired through this channel which are then intertwined with discursive appeals for generous practices by various organizational infrastructures. By infusing certain ideologies within these appeals, there are attempts to draw Singaporeans into responsive relations of encounters with the needs of tsunami affected peoples and places. For the state, discourses of 'responsible citizenship' and 'caring nation' seek to translate physical geographical proximity into a relation of proximity whereby Singaporeans are morally exhorted to engage in generous practices towards neighbouring countries. In terms of NGOs in Singapore, those which are secular in nature rely on ideas of social justice to close the distance between Singaporeans and tsunami affected peoples in order for

generous practices to take place. Non secular ones however slide such moralizing tendencies towards religions concerns in a bid to achieve similar responses.

Chapters 5 and 6 evaluate the effectiveness of the information pathways and appeals discussed in the earlier chapter in getting Singaporeans to engage in generous practices. While tsunami images and appeals by state and NGOs are generally successful in drawing Singaporeans into responsive and attentive relations of encounters with the needs of tsunami affected peoples and places, it is also interesting to see how these appeals are (re)interpreted by Singaporeans to justify their generous acts. Furthermore, other events and networks also have the agency in eliciting Singaporeans' donations and volunteering practices. While I have gone into a lengthy discussion on all these motivations, it was never my intention to provide a comprehensive listing of these impetuses to act. Instead, my point is to direct attention to the ways in which dispositions of Singaporeans to respond to tsunami affected peoples and places are worked up and how opportunities for action on these dispositions are organized via the state and NGOs. As such, generous acts by Singaporeans are not subjected merely to individual expression of altruism or self interest. Rather, generosity is recast as an embodied disposition that subsists in the practices of attending to others and in relations of responsiveness.

7.2 The Gift of the Disaster

French literary theorist Maurice Blanchot (1995) reminds us that the literal meaning of *dis-aster* is the loss of a star or the parting from one's guiding light, a loss which is also paradoxically a gift. It may be all too easy to associate a disaster like the IOT with loss and pain, but Blanchot (1995) argues that what is perhaps more precious is

the courage to search for what a disaster *offers* us as much as what it *deprives* us. The disaster is thus a tragedy as well as an opportunity. What then can we learn from the IOT?

I have emphasized in this thesis that the IOT serves to momentarily close the distance between 'them' and 'us'—the provision of generous practices creates an ongoing connection, however superficial, between Singaporeans who give aid and those who receive it. By engaging in such a study, I hope to show how responses (as donors, as volunteers, as academic researchers) carry with them responsibility. There is a need to be more careful and reflexive about the way we give and more attention should be given to the organizational channels through which generous practices are mediated. There isn't a more apposite time to suggest that relief efforts could be carried out more sensitively, more fairly, more effectively. This is of great importance not only for those still living through this tragedy, but also for all those who will be on the receiving end of disasters and relief efforts, yet to come. As a researcher writing on this topic, my responsibility does not simply stop at exemplifying what geographical works as such this can offer to those in need. As Philo (2005) cautions, a body of thought that knows too well in advance of the event what it has to give runs the risk of expecting something back for its offerings, a stake in the field, a consolidation of disciplinary authority (see Das, 1995). Rather, throughout the whole *process* of *doing* this thesis, I have been humbled by the valuable inputs from many people including local critics and 'victims' of the IOT that have inevitably shaped my intellectual response here.

In championing for relief efforts to be conducted in a sensitive and just manner, future research can be directed at carving out spaces for the inclusion of voices from

people at the receiving end. Are the recipients getting the (kinds of) aid that they require? How do they view such acts of generosity? As I have alluded in Chapters 5 and 6, recipients' receptivity to generous acts can influence materialization and continuation of such practices by Singaporeans. Furthermore, such questions serve as a crucial reminder that best-intended acts may not necessarily produce desirable consequences. Generosity as we need to acknowledge will "fall short, overshoot, stray from its target, this being the inevitable fate of the gift in all its guises" (Frank, 2004: 2) Hence as Clark (forthcoming) argues, if generosity is truly an opening of oneself to others, it will also make the one who gives vulnerable. The donor/volunteer too must be prepared to feel hurt, to be chastened, criticized or even rejected. For only in this way will we learn to give wisely as well as compassionately.

Sidaway and Teo (2005: 2) have so aptly described the IOT as an "astounding lesson in interconnected physical and human geographies". The challenge for geographers, according to them, is then to unpick the "myriad geographies of the event, context and aftermath." This thesis is an effort to respond to this challenge but more importantly reveal lessons where our own geographies (as donors, volunteers, researchers) get unpicked, dispossessed and disoriented by the IOT. Such lessons, no doubt painful and searching, are the gift of the disaster.

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